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A Golden-Saddle classic—

CRAZY-MOON GUNS by BENNETT FOSTER

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ACTION STORIES

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► Great Range Novel

BRIDE OF THE HANG-TREE HELLION . . . Frank Carl Young 80

Out of the murky past rode the yellow-eyed gunmon, Kee Nugent—with the dread secret that would stampede Tall Bear Range into a powder-smoke inferno, pit friend against friend in blood-grudge showdown . . . winner to hang!

► Two Gunsmoke Novelets

VENGEANCE GUNS IN SILVER TOWN . . . William Heuman 2

They found young Rob Campbell with a .44 slug in the back of his head . . . and suddenly, from Texas, from Wyoming, from Frisco, three more hard-case, quick-trigger Campbells were coming—hell-fire in their holsters!

DON'T YOU DIE FOR ME! Joseph Chadwick 36

John Sands watched the gun-wolves crowding a slim, defiant girl off her dead husband's spread, and tried to shrug . . . he had a range-full of his own troubles. But somehow the shrug turned into a lightning drawl!

► Five Thrilling Short Stories

SINALOA STAGE Karl Kasky 24

Easy pickin's, Reardon argued—a fat strong box, no shotgun guard, a clear get-away—but old Whip Lyons was too wise on owlhoot to take the bait!

FANCY DRAW Marvin J. Jones 27

If the game is bullets wild, and you fill your hand with Sam Colt's Aces, just make damned sure of one thing: Call the right mon!

CAT'S-PAW KILLER Carl Kent 33

He sat, hand on his gun—staring at the crowded bar, the laughing couples on the dance floor—waiting, like a trapped rat, for someone, anyone, to draw and start blazing!

MARSHAL OF WHEEL-GAP W. V. Athanas 56

No one was surprised when a slick-holstered bad-hat ran the gunless Marshal out of Art's Saloon . . . but then someone shouted: "He's comin' back!"

HEIR TO A .44 Bill Chambers 65

For a pint-sized younker, Tuck Belmont could shore give a gallon o' six-gun back-chat!

► Golden Saddle Western Classic

CRAZY-MOON GUNS Bennett Foster 69

They were hammering up a gallows in back of the juzgadó—and Henderson sat grimly in his cell, listening, wondering if he'd live long enough to hang . . .

CRAZY-MOON GUNS © MCMXXXV by FICTION HOUSE, Inc.

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VENGEANCE GUNS IN SILVER TOWN

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

ED CAMPBELL HAD EXPECTED to be forgotten in Grand Coulee because it had been nine years since he'd entered the town, but he hadn't expected to be forgotten so completely. Riding from one end of the long, wide main street, which had once been the only street in Grand Coulee, he saw no one whom he recognized. He did not even recognize the town. It had spread out in all directions; it had crossed Lee's Creek and gobbled up the tract of timber on the other side. There were dozens of streets now—some of them meandering in all directions, the others laid out at right angles to each other.

The people were different, too. They

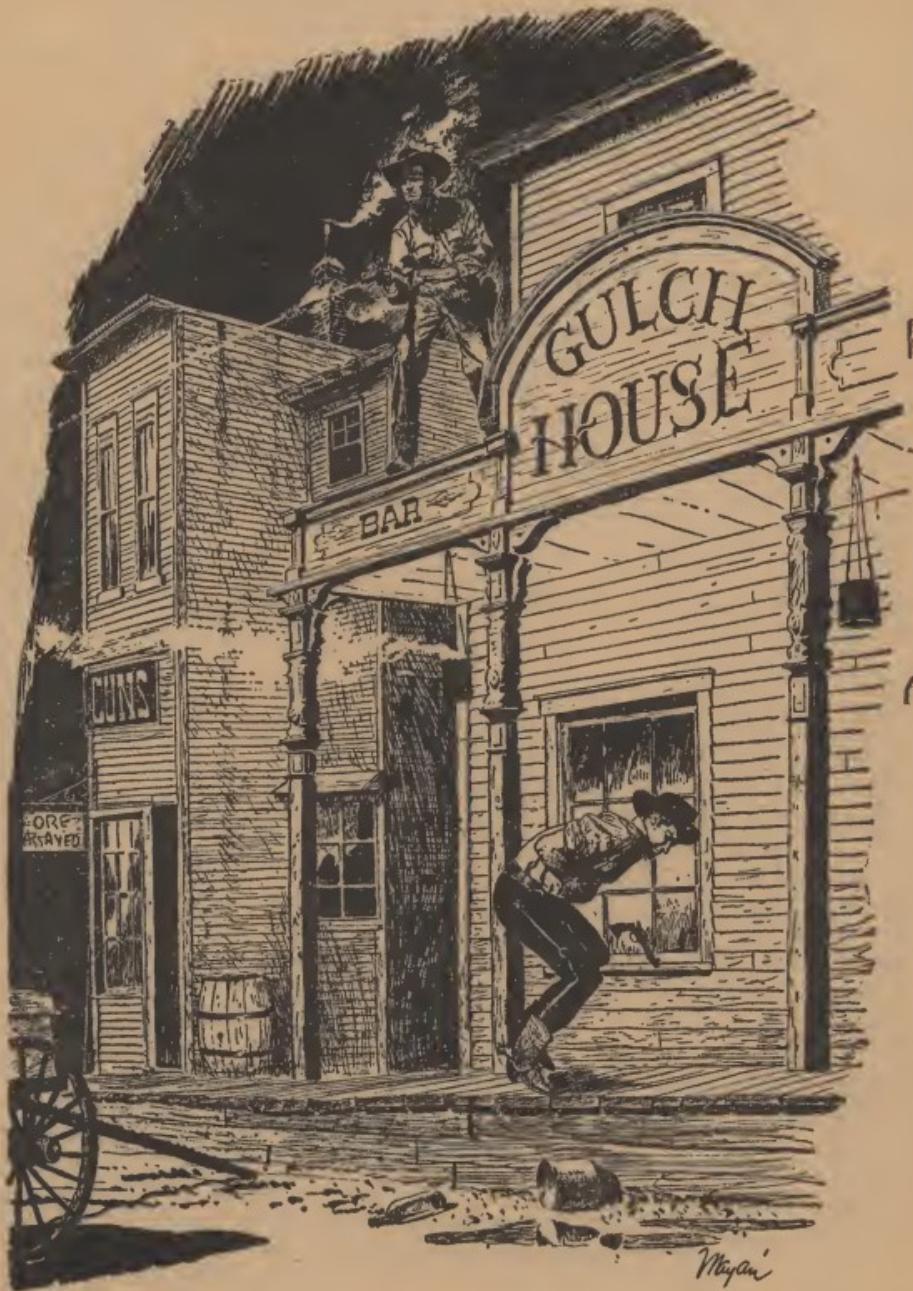
were all strangers and this was not their town. Ed Campbell could see it in their faces. They had not come here to stay, but to take and to take, ever seeking and never being filled. It was in their faces. This was Grand Coulee now, former quiet cow town; now center of the stupendously rich "Silver Lady" strike.

There were fifteen thousand people in Grand Coulee tonight, where there had been three hundred when Ed Campbell rode south with a group of Texas trail riders. Brother Bruce had gone north into Wyoming and had settled down to become a successful rancher; brother Jeff had taken to wearing the star, and was known in three states as a straight and fast shooter; in

Ed's Colt blazed from the roof of the porch. . . .



The easiest way to get rid of a straight-talkin' frontier newspaperman is to put a .44 slug in the back of his head—but when Silver Town's gun-weasels did same to young Rob Campbell, they only set hell in motion! For suddenly, from Texas, from Wyoming, from Frisco, three more hard-case, quick-trigger Campbells were coming . . . doom in their holsters!



Los Angeles, in 'Frisco.

Only young Rob Campbell had stayed in Grand Coulee—young Rob with some book learning and little knowledge of fighting. Rob had started Grand Coulee's first newspaper when the silver strike came; he'd been fairly successful, but a .44 caliber bullet through the back of his skull, as he sat at his desk one night, had shortened his career. And now the Campbells were coming—up from the south, from the north, from the west coast.

Ed Campbell had heard the news from a Texan rider. He'd been scouting for the army, crossing the border into Mexico with the cavalry, chasing Cochise. He'd drawn his pay and started north, just as he knew Bruce and Jeff would head toward Grand Coulee; they'd come if they had to go through hell to get there.

THE BLUE BELL Saloon was the only one Ed recognized, and even the Blue Bell had changed. It was two stories high, where before it had been one. It seemed to have spread out on either side.

There was a crowd on the porch when Ed dismounted and tied the big gray to the hitch rack. Ducking under it, he went up the steps, attracting very little attention. Grand Coulee was now a town of strangers, grasping, greedy, silver mad strangers, and some of these strangers had murdered Rob Campbell. They would have to pay.

Lacey Prymm had been the proprietor of the Blue Bell in the old days, and Ed Campbell remembered him best on a hot Saturday night, an enormously fat man, sweating profusely as he hustled behind his little bar, trying to accommodate the vast thirsts of the Texas trail riders.

Lacey Prymm was still running the Blue Bell, but he was no longer behind his bar. Ed Campbell spotted him at one end of the sixty foot mahogany bar, leaning his huge bulk over the wood, commanding a view of the entire room. He was dressed in eastern store clothes; he wore a big diamond on one of his fingers, and he watched five perspiring bartenders ladle out the drinks.

He saw Ed Campbell coming in, too, because he watched his gaudy red and green glass bat-wing doors. There was recognition in his green eyes, and Ed went direct-

ly toward him.

Prymm signaled one of his bartenders to pour one, and the glass of cold beer was waiting when Ed finally picked his way through the card tables and reached the bar. Prymm said,

"Evenin', Ed. You're late."

He said it as if he'd seen Ed Campbell the previous night instead of nine years before. There was no surprise in his eyes, no warm welcome, but Lacey Prymm was glad to see him. The proffered glass of beer proved that.

"News comes kind of late in Sonora," Ed observed. "Didn't waste much time, Lacey."

"Jeff beat you here," Prymm told him. "Over against the wall near the door."

Ed Campbell downed the glass of beer and set the glass on the bar. He turned, wiping his lips, and he saw brother Jeff lounging against the wall, apparently watching a card game. He'd seen Jeff the last time four years ago, but the gun marshal hadn't changed. He was small, slim, a little gray in his black hair now. His small hands were clasped in his gun belt, and he wore a big Navy Colt on the right side. His only greeting to his brother was a slight nod, and that was the sign as to the way it would be. As far as was possible, Jeff didn't want this town to know that the Campbell brothers were gathering. Some men would know and spot them, but the majority of the town wouldn't know, and the men who'd murdered Rob Campbell wouldn't know.

Lifting his right hand to his jaw, Ed Campbell rubbed it gently, and that was the way he acknowledged Jeff's greeting. He'd ridden a long way this day, and it was already past ten o'clock in the evening. He felt the need of a bath and a shave and some food in him, but he said to Lacey Prymm,

"What about Bruce?"

"Find him over in Rob's smashed-up office. He was in here fifteen minutes ago."

"Who smashed up Rob's office?" Ed wanted to know.

"Who shot him through the back of the head?" the fat man countered.

"I'll find out," Ed Campbell said tersely, "and damned quick."

Lacey Prymm nodded. "Reckon that's what Bruce said," he stated. "He's readin' through some o' Rob's old newspapers, findin' out who Rob didn't like an' who didn't like him."

"Where's the office?" Ed asked.

"Across the Creek," the fat man said. "On Jackson Street. Turn left when you cross the bridge."

ED CAMPBELL was about to push away from the bar when a tall, black-haired man came up, nodding to Prymm, looking at Ed curiously. Prymm said, "Evenin', Mr. Conroy."

The tall man nodded pleasantly. He was well-dressed, black frock coat, clean white shirt. He wore a flat-crowned, black sombrero to match the coat. Looking at Ed, he said, "Stranger in town?"

"Might call it that," Ed told him. He took tobacco and paper from his shirt pocket and started to roll a cigarette.

Conroy watched him interestedly as he ordered his drink from one of the bartenders. Lacey Prymm said nothing. He leaned over his bar, a huge hulk of man, heavy jaws grinding on the stub of a cigar.

"You'll find this a good town," Conroy said to Ed, "if you're a hustler."

"That right?" Ed murmured.

Conroy turned to look at him as he lifted the glass to his lips. He smiled as if recognizing the type—a closed-mouth man who apparently had no business. Likely on the run from the law, too.

"Have a drink on me?" Conroy asked. "Had mine," Ed said. "Thanks."

Conroy smiled again. He set the glass back on the bar, nodded, and stepped away to make room for another man. Ed watched him walking across the floor, nodding to acquaintances, a tall man, poised, cool, and supremely sure of himself.

"Jack Conroy," Lacey Prymm said, shifting the cigar to one corner of his mouth. "Owns the Lulu Belle Mine." He added, "Came to Grand Coulee six months ago with his sister. He's a hustler."

"Silver operator," Ed Campbell said. There was no interest in his voice.

The fat man rubbed his hands together. He said pointedly, "Maybe you came to this town to see silver operators, Ed."

"How's that?" Ed asked him.

"Go see Bruce," Prymm advised. "See what he found out."

Ed Campbell pushed away from the bar. He saw Jeff watching him as he walked toward the bat-wing doors. Jack Conroy was watching him, too, from the far side of the room, and Conroy was talking to a man whom Ed remembered as Neil Carr who'd been a lawyer when Ed lived in Grand Coulee. Carr remembered him. Interest came into his eyes and he said something to Conroy.

Stepping out on the porch, Ed Campbell was thinking grimly, *So now you know.* He was wondering what the silver operators had to do with the murder of Rob Campbell.

There were crowds on the walks, flowing out into the streets, and the occasional horsemen had to pick their way through carefully to avoid them. There were many drunks, many saloons, apparently little law. Ed had yet to see the man who wore the star in this town.

He rode the gray across the little wooden bridge over Lee's Creek, and he turned left. One block to the north he discovered the little one-story wooden structure which had housed the Grand Coulee Courier. The sign was still over the door, but it was hanging askew. The front windows were smashed, and the door was wide open, the lock having been broken.

There was a light inside, coming from the rear room. Ed dismounted and stepped inside, his boots making the floor boards squeak. He called, "Bruce?"

"Step in," the older brother said. His voice was something like young Rob's. There were other points of similarity between the men—the youngest son and the older brother. They had the same curly brown hair; the same mild blue eyes, but there the similarity ended. Bruce was big, a two hundred pounder, as solid as a rock. Young Rob had been slim, almost frail, never too well.

BRUCE WAS SITTING at a battered oak desk, a pile of old newspapers in front of him. He looked the part of the successful rancher. He'd taken on more weight, but he was still plenty tough,

strong enough to throw a bullet. He looked at Ed intently, and then he smiled. He said,

"Still on the loose, Ed?"

"What do those papers say?" Ed Campbell asked him. He was looking around the room, which was a shambles. The big printing machine had been overturned and smashed beyond repair. Chairs and tables, boxes of print were broken, scattered on the floor. The glass in the two rear windows was smashed. Printers' ink was splashed against the walls and on the floor.

Bruce said thinly, "Somebody didn't want a newspaper in this town, Ed. We find who that somebody was and maybe we'll know who killed Rob."

"Reckon you'll never know," a voice drawled through one of the broken panes, "standin' next to a lighted lantern with the blinds up high. Bruce has been runnin' cows for so many years he's beginnin' to look an' think like one. You should know better, Ed."

It was Jeff's voice, and Ed could see his face in the broken square. Ed said casually, "You brushed a tin can in the alley with your boot, Jeff, and then you swore before you started toward that window. You didn't know they had no glass in them."

"Apache ears," Jeff Campbell grunted. He came through the rear door and he slapped big Bruce's shoulder as he came around to the front of the desk.

"Not only that," Ed went on, "but you were followed by three riders. I heard them coming across the bridge a little while after you came over. They've dismounted outside."

Even Jeff heard the slight jangle of spurs, and his right hand dropped to the handle of the Colt gun on his hip. Ed turned around, facing the door leading from the front room of the building. He could hear the heavy steps on the boards, and then a big, loose-shouldered man came in. He had long, powerful arms and thick wrists. His eyes were puffy, a blue-green color. He had a broad, misshapen nose. A silver star gleamed on his vest front.

Two men followed him into the room, smaller, cat-like men, with shifty eyes, whose hands seemed to be hooked very

close to the handles of their guns. They didn't look at anybody or anything in particular, and one man was constantly sniffing through his nose as if it had been broken and he couldn't breathe through it properly.

Ed Campbell had run across this type before—the professional gun-throwers—and he had nothing but contempt for them. They killed for money.

The man with the star said sourly, "What in hell you boys doin' here? This is private property."

"If you're the law in this town," Ed retorted, "why in hell didn't you protect it, and the man who owned it?"

"He's not the law," Jeff Campbell said calmly. "Lige Henderson is duly elected sheriff. This chap is his deputy. Goes by the name of McSween."

McSween's eyes narrowed as he studied the three men before him. He said, "I'm still askin' what you're doin' in this place?"

"Reading the newspapers," Bruce Campbell said. "Any objections?"

"If you don't have any," Ed said coolly, before McSween could speak, "get out before you're thrown out."

McSween's eyes started to pop. He opened his mouth and then closed it. He said jeeringly, "So you're the tough Campbells."

"You knew it," Jeff told him. "Now take your dogs an' crawl away."

The two men with McSween looked at the floor apprehensively. They were not particularly insulted by the remark. They looked at McSween and they looked at the big guns on the hips of Ed and Jeff Campbell. Bruce, too, was armed, but they couldn't see his weapon behind the desk.

"I want you to know this," McSween said threateningly; "we don't want any rough stuff in this town. There's law an' order here."

"When did it start?" Ed Campbell asked him caustically; "after Rob Campbell was murdered?"

"Rob Campbell printed a lot o' damned stuff that wasn't true," McSween growled. "He—" He got no further. He'd taken a step forward when he started to speak, and Ed slipped off his hat and slashed him across the face with it.

McSWEEN gasped as he staggered back against the wall. One of his men had his hand on the gun on his hip, but he didn't take the gun out. Jeff Campbell's gun cleared leather a fraction of a second before the professional's hand started to move, and Bruce's gun came up over the rim of the desk.

Ed Campbell said softly, "Reckon you called Rob a liar, mister. Like to do it again?"

He backed up a few paces and he rubbed his hands thoughtfully on his trousers. It was a plain invitation to the deputy, but McSween didn't want any part of it. Ed could see that in his face. He looked at Jeff Campbell's gun, and he looked into Ed's face. He said tersely,

"You boys came to this town lookin' for trouble. You'll find it before you go out—if you go out."

"I'll have some of mine now," Ed smiled thinly. "Put away your guns, boys." He heard Jeff's Colt slide back into the holster.

Still McSween made no move. He'd come in with a big bluff and he hadn't expected his bluff to be called. Ed Campbell could read that in his face. He was uncertain now, and because he was uncertain he was not himself. There would be doubt in his gun if he drew it, and the man did not live who could draw a gun when there was doubt in his mind.

McSween wisely decided to wait. Ed read that decision in his eyes, too. McSween said,

"I'll know you an' you'll know me in this town, Campbell. Watch how you walk."

Ed laughed at him as he went out the door. He heard them mount and ride off, and then he said to Bruce, "What about the papers?"

Bruce Campbell looked at the pile of newspapers before him. He said quietly,

"Rob seemed ready to hit something pretty big when they got him."

"Silver operators?" Ed asked.

Bruce looked at him quickly and nodded. "Rob seemed to feel that there was a big ring operating in Grand Coulee—a ring which salted poor mines, gave out dishonest reports on other mines and stock, manipulated the prices of silver stocks on the 'Frisco market, and cleaned up small for-

tunes for themselves doing so. They've been gradually drawing a big net over the little operators on the lode, forcing them out of business."

"How can they do that?" Jeff wanted to know.

"By controlling the ore wagons, for one thing," Bruce explained. "Rob has it down here in one of his back issues. Every pound of ore hauled to the surface of every mine has to be taken to the stamp mills, and the ore carriers charge a certain sum per load. If they start to jack up their prices to the small operators it soon becomes unprofitable to mine silver unless they have ore running a couple of hundred dollars to the ton."

"And Rob knew that there was a combine in Grand Coulee getting a strangle hold on the mining business?" Ed Campbell asked.

"This group," Bruce explained, "was gobbling up one mine after another. They were starting to build their own stamp mills, too, thus getting control of that end of the business. They'd refine silver for less than any of the other mill owners until they'd put the mills out of business, and then the cost of refining ore would go sky-high. The silver operators working on a margin had to sell out."

"And to the combine," Jeff Campbell murmured. "Very clever."

"Rob mention any names?" Ed asked.

"He was getting ready to," Bruce said, "when they caught up with him. It seems he'd been threatened and they'd tried to bribe him to go easy because government officials in 'Frisco and the territorial government were getting suspicious of their actions."

"We find out who is in the ring," Jeff said, "and we know who killed Rob."

"Then we have to prove it," Bruce said.

Jeff laughed tonelessly, and even Ed grinned a little.

"We're not needin' too much proof," Jeff stated. "My gun will sing its song when I know who's in this ring."

BRUCE grimaced a little, and Ed could see that he was the law-abiding rancher. He'd come here to see that justice was done, but it had to be done in the legal

way. Brother Jeff, and he, himself, were different. They'd done a lot of drifting and they'd seen a lot of things; they'd seen that the law didn't always operate the way it should on the frontier, and there were times when a sixgun in hand was more effective than an appeal to the law.

Bruce said, "Jeff, you've been here longer than we have. Who runs this town?"

"Lige Henderson doesn't," Jeff said. "Lige is the elected sheriff, but this McSween, his deputy, gives him orders. It's a hell of a set-up."

"Anybody else?" Bruce asked.

"Fellow by the name of Jack Conroy seems like a pretty big man here," Jeff said. He said to Ed, "He had a word with you at the bar, Ed. How's he sound?"

"He's nobody's fool," Ed told him. He was looking through some of Rob's newspapers, but he was thinking of Conroy. He'd been impressed with the tall man's appearance. It did not seem possible that Conroy would be mixed up in a murder such as Rob's.

Bruce got up. He was the older brother, and he still thought that he was giving the orders. He said,

"Everybody in this town will know by tomorrow that we're here, and why we're here. Keep your eyes and ears open and stay out of trouble."

Jeff glanced at Ed, and there was some humor in his eyes. "Reckon I always managed to stay out o' trouble, Bruce," he chuckled, "an' that goes for Ed, too. Only thing is we don't like to be troubled neither. Do we, Ed?"

"I'm a peaceable man," Ed smiled, "and right now I'm damned hungry."

They split up. Bruce went back to his hotel; Jeff lost himself in the throngs on the street, and Ed headed for the nearest restaurant. He was sitting near the window, consuming a double order of ham and eggs when he saw Lige Henderson go by, making his rounds of the town.

He'd known Henderson in the old days. Lige had been the town Marshal when Ed was a boy, and he was an old man now. He walked with a stoop and his shoulders seemed to have shrunk. He'd been rather proud of his job ten or a dozen years ago when Grand Coulee had been a cow town,

and his chief duties were to keep recalcitrant young punchers in line. He'd been good at that because he was a mild man, always ready to arbitrate, to give in to pressure. In this new boom town he still wore the star, but according to Jeff Campbell, McSween was the man who ruled the roost.

Henderson happened to glance into the restaurant window, and seeing Ed looking straight at him, he stepped in and walked to the table. He'd aged in the face, too. His blue eyes were faded, tired, as if he'd seen more trouble than he'd expected to, or wanted to see in this life. He said, "Heard you was in town, Ed. How are you?"

"Better than Rob," Ed said levelly. He was watching this man, wondering how much he knew, and then he saw that Lige Henderson knew nothing.

Henderson took off his hat and mopped his head because the night was still hot. He sighed and he said, "Damned sorry about the boy, Ed. I tried to talk to him."

"Don't talk to me," Ed warned. "Don't tell me to walk easy, Lige."

The old man frowned. "Never was no damned use talkin' to a Campbell," he muttered. "This town's changed, Ed."

"That's right," Ed said. "They used to shoot men in the front; now they put bullets through the back of the head. I'll watch who walks behind me, Lige."

"There's big money here," Henderson went on, "bigger than you or I dream of, Ed. Some men will go pretty far for money."

Ed Campbell looked at him steadily as he ate. He didn't say anything, but it was in his eyes, in the little smile he gave the old man. He was saying, *How far did you go, Lige?*

LIGE Henderson didn't stay long. He put his hat on his head and he looked out through the window at the crowd. There were barkers in front of every saloon and gambling house now. Music drifted toward them from the Roseland Dance Hall directly across the street. A drunken rider careened down the middle of the wide road, scattering dust, drawing curses from the crowd. Somewhere, on the other side of Lee's Creek, a gun cracked.

"Just wanted to tell you," the Marshal of Grand Coulee said, "I liked Rob. I like you, Ed. I don't want to see you layin' on a slab in the back o' Lang's place. Walk easy."

"I will," Ed told him, "after I put Rob's killers on those slabs, Lige."

Henderson shook his head. He looked even older as he left the restaurant and started up the street. He was a man who had not grown up with his town.

Ed Campbell finished his meal and then crossed over to the barber shop. He had a shave, a haircut, and then a bath in the back room, and when he came out it was past midnight, but he felt good and he had no sleep in him. He'd put on a clean shirt in the barber shop and lighted up a cigar he'd purchased there.

Walking along the street, with the cooling breeze coming in from the mountains now, he felt revitalized. A heavy weight seemed to have been on his shoulders all the way up from Mexico, but tonight the load was not there, and then the breeze blew an old newspaper up against his legs as he was going past a lighted store front.

Looking down, he read the words, 'Grand Coulee Courier', and below the caption, 'Robert Campbell, Editor.' He walked on in the direction of the Blue Bell Saloon, and his jaws clenched the cigar were tight, squared.

Lacey Prymm was still in the same position at the far end of his bar, looking as if he'd sprouted out of the wood like a giant mushroom. He tilted his cigar toward the ceiling when he saw Ed come in, and then he glanced across the room.

Through the haze of tobacco smoke, across card tables, Ed Campbell saw Jack Conroy standing near the side door, talking with McSween, the deputy. Conroy's back was toward Ed.

When Ed came up to the bar, Prymm said evenly,

"Heard you had a little run-in with Jug McSween, Ed."

"You don't miss much," Ed stated.

"My business," Prymm chuckled. "That's how I got where I am, my boy."

Studying this big lay-out in the Blue Bell, Ed Campbell suddenly realized that the fat Lacey Prymm had prospered tre-

mendously during the years he'd been away. The Blue Bell was the biggest house of its kind in Grand Coulee. There was an elaborate second floor gambling room which was reserved for the sport of the big silver operators. Small fortunes were supposed to have passed from one hand to another up on that second floor. The barber who'd cut Ed's hair had passed on this information to him.

"What did you find out from Rob's papers?" Prymm wanted to know.

"You read them," Ed Campbell told him. "You know what Rob was saying."

Lacey Prymm nodded seriously. "If the boy could have exposed that ring," he said, "it would have been a great thing for this town. They work under cover and they're getting stronger all the time."

Ed Campbell leaned on the bar and he glanced in Jack Conroy's direction. He said, "You know as much as any man in this town, Prymm. Who would you guess is behind it?"

Prymm smiled. "If I knew that, Ed," he intimated, "I'd be a wise man, and maybe I'd also be dead like your brother."

"Who's been putting the pressure on the ore carriers and the stamp mills!" Ed persisted. "That might give us a lead."

Prymm shook his vast head. "First it's one and then it's another," he stated. "It's hard to tell who is doing legitimate business and who is holding a stick over the head of another man. This much I know. The big man behind the ring doesn't have his name on the door of any mining company. He works through others. The law can't touch him because he doesn't even own the stocks he controls."

"He's a smart man," Ed Campbell scowled.

Lacey Prymm looked at him steadily. He said, "Some day he'll run this part of the country. It's money that buys power in governments. He'll elect his own governor when the territory becomes a state; he'll send his own men to Congress."

"If he lives that long," Ed retorted, and he walked away, feeling strangely displeased with the fat man's talk. It was as if Prymm, himself, who'd been a conservative businessman in the old days, was admiring the power which money bought.

HERE was a chair vacant at one of the card tables, and Ed paused behind it until a player nodded him in. He played through two hands, not very much interested whether he won or lost, his mind still on the other business, and then he saw Jug McSween coming toward the table.

The deputy pulled up a few feet away, and he stood there, watching the game, a grim smile on his face. When Ed finally took notice of him, he said tersely, "Didn't know you went around by yourself, Campbell. Ain't you afraid, without your brothers backin' your play?"

Ed leaned back in the chair. He looked at his cards and he said, "Draw two."

Jug McSween laughed, and Ed Campbell could almost see the man's courage rising.

"Not so tough any more, are you, Campbell?" the deputy grinned.

Still Ed didn't say anything, but the men at the table with him looked uncomfortable. Others had heard McSween's remarks, and they were watching, knowing what was coming.

Ed puffed on his cigar and looked at his cards. He looked up at McSween once, but he didn't say anything. There was no expression on his face. One of Lacey Prymm's three bouncers was watching them.

McSween laughed again, an ugly triumphant laugh, and then Ed accidentally dropped a card to the floor. It fluttered down, face upward, and it was the ace of spades.

McSween took a step forward and his boot came down over the card just as Ed reached down to pick it up. Calmly, Ed grasped McSween's right ankle, came out of the chair, and tugged hard, lifting the deputy clean off the floor. McSween landed on his back with a thud when Ed released his grip. He rolled over, cursing, and the three Blue Bell floormen moved toward them to stop the fight and put it outside.

Lacey Prymm's voice reached them. Prymm said, "Let it be."

Ed Campbell almost had to smile. Prymm knew that it was going to be a fight now, and in his establishment, entailing possible damage to the premises, but yet Prymm was calling off his floor-

men, inviting the two to have it out here. He did not want to walk out to the porch to watch it!

McSween got off the floor, lips drawn back in a snarl. Deliberately, he took off his gunbelt and placed it on the table. Ed Campbell smiled and did the same. He saw Jeff coming through the door, and then McSween rushed him. He swung his left hand, hitting the deputy full on the nose, smashing the bones, dropping him to his knees. Blood poured from both nostrils, and McSween stayed there for a moment waiting till the shock of that blow passed off.

Then he got up and snatched a chair from the floor. Whirling it around, he hurled it at Ed's head, following after it with swinging fists.

Ed ducked the chair, but he wasn't quite ready for McSween's charge. One of the deputy's long-armed swings caught him in the mouth, smashing his lips, knocking him half across a nearby table.

McSween followed him, swinging another tremendous blow for the face as Ed started to roll off the table. He missed this time, his knuckles glancing off the smooth wood where Ed Campbell's head had been.

The crowd had started to swarm around, tightening the circle, and Lacey Prymm's voice boomed out again:

"Give them room."

His three floormen went to work, widening the circle. Ed saw Jack Conroy in the second row of the crowd, watching, standing a few feet away from Jeff. Brother Jeff's face was expressionless. He was smoking a cigar.

Both men were standing up now, eyeing each other, and then McSween, the blood from his smashed nose reddening the front of his shirt and vest, tore in, head low, reaching for Ed's legs to throw him to the floor. He was the heavier man, and on the floor he knew he would have the advantage.

Ed stepped back nimbly, and when McSween lunged past him, off-balance, he slashed downward with his right hand, the fist catching the deputy on the back of the neck, dropping him to the floor as if he'd been axed.

Thinking the fight was over, Ed walked over, picked up his gun belt, and strapped it on. He was bleeding freely from the mouth and he wanted to wash off the blood. He started to push through the crowd, heading for the door, when he heard Jeff's warning call.

He turned in time to see McSween crashing through the crowd, coming toward him, the lower part of his face red with blood, eyes blazing like an animal's. He had no time to avoid the man now, and he was off balance.

McSWEEN charged into him, hitting him around the waist, driving him backward toward the big plate glass window which looked out on the porch. Both men crashed through it, landing out on the porch, upsetting one of Prymm's barkers who'd been walking back and forth there.

Ed scrambled to his feet, feeling the tiny cuts on his face and hands. His head had come in contact with the wooden porch railing and he was slightly dazed. When he got up he staggered a little, bumping into the barker who was trying to get out of the way.

The crowd was surging through the doors as McSween lunged in at him again. He caught the deputy around the neck and hung on, feeling McSween's hard fists tearing at his body. He began to punch, himself, after awhile, and he backed McSween toward the porch railing.

Men were running toward the scene of the fight from all directions. They were looking out of the hotel windows directly across the street. Still swinging, Ed backed McSween against the railing, kept hitting, and the deputy went through the light boards, landing on the walk below.

Ed tumbled after him. McSween got up, still retreating, his face a bloody mask in the red glow of the kerosene flares outside the Blue Bell. Ed followed him off the walk, hitting stolidly, knowing that the only way he would stop McSween now was to knock him completely unconscious.

McSween retreated to the hitch rail and he stood with his back against it, swinging feebly. Ed hit him three times before he sank down in the dust of the road. Com-

pletely winded then, Ed stood there, leaning both arms over the hitch rack, blood dripping from his face. He was facing the hotel across the street, and he saw the people looking at him through the windows.

A girl was up at the second floor window, just above the doorway. She had a shawl over her shoulders, and her face was white. She was very pretty. She was looking at him, horrified.

Jeff came up to the hitch rack and said, "I'll wash you up, Ed. You're pretty rough with your fists."

Ed Campbell watched the girl on the second floor close the window and pull down the shade. Then he followed Jeff back into the Blue Bell and through a door to one of the back rooms. A floorman, at Prymm's orders, had a wash basin and towels ready for him. Prymm came in when Jeff had finished bathing the cuts. He sat down in a chair a few feet away, still puffing on his cigar, and the chair groaned beneath his weight. He said, "So you've made an enemy, Ed."

"Any man steps on the ace of spades deserves to be an enemy," Ed observed. "Like the fight, Prymm?"

"It was good," Prymm admitted. "I've seen better in the old days when two trail riders got together." He looked at Ed thoughtfully and he said, "That woman you were staring at in the hotel was Conroy's sister, Marva."

"That right?" Ed said.

"I didn't see Lige Henderson around," Jeff stated.

"He saw the fight," Prymm smiled, "but Lige stays away when there's trouble. Lige likes to know which way the wind is blowing before he does anything."

"A careful man," Jeff said, "will live a long time."

The fat man smiled. "That's a good saying," he admitted. He left the room, nodding his head in approval.

When the door closed behind him, Jeff Campbell said, "Lacey has done pretty well for himself with that saloon, Ed. He's a hustler underneath."

Ed nodded. He was tired now, and sore all through. He wanted to lay down and forget about everything for a while.

"There's an extra bunk in my room at the hotel," Jeff said. "Bring your stuff up."

Ed Campbell slept soundly for twelve hours. When he awoke the sun was streaming through the windows, and Jeff was gone. Ed shaved gingerly, his face still hurting from the glass cuts.

When he was finished, he went down into the lobby and crossed over to the dining room. Jack Conroy and his sister were just leaving. The tall man nodded pleasantly and paused. Ed took off his hat.

Conroy said jokingly, "You look much better than last night, Campbell."

"I feel better," Ed admitted. He glanced at Marva Conroy. Her eyes were dark. She was looking at him sympathetically.

"My sister, Marva," Conroy said. "I told her that the fight had been pushed on you last night."

"It wasn't a pretty sight for a woman," Ed said. "The next time we'll try to keep it inside."

"I hope," Marva smiled, "there aren't too many times, Mr. Campbell."

"I'll be careful," Ed assured her, and Jack Conroy laughed.

"From what I've heard and seen of the Campbells," he said, "the other fellow had better be careful."

THEY WENT OUT, and Ed watched them go. Sitting at one of the tables in the dining room he could watch them cross the street and move up along the opposite walk. He remembered then that it was Sunday, and that he'd seen a church in that direction.

A church bell started to ring after awhile, and the streets were quite deserted. A swamper was cleaning up inside the Blue Bell, just coming out through the bat-wing doors, swishing his mop.

Bruce Campbell came in through the door as Ed was sipping his coffee. The older brother sat down, placing his hat on a peg behind him. He said severely, "So you've already started the rough tactics."

"I didn't start them," Ed said modestly. "I finished what McSween started in Rob's office last night."

Bruce shook his head. "My tactics and

yours are entirely different, Ed," he said.

Ed lighted a cigarette. "You asking Lige Henderson to find Rob's killers?" he murmured.

Bruce frowned. "I'm going about it my own way," he stated. "I'm contacting the ore carriers, and the small silver operators who have been forced out of business. I work slowly and I pick up one thing at a time until I have the net formed."

"Then you get a bullet in the back of the head," Ed told him, "like Rob."

"I bring in the law," Bruce said, ignoring the remark, "if not in this town then from the territorial seat. I'll have a United States marshal sent here to see that justice is done."

Ed smiled coldly. "That takes time," he said. "A bullet travels faster and it's permanent."

Bruce scowled at him. "Some day," he muttered, "another man's bullet will travel faster than yours, and that goes for Jeff, too."

He nodded and got up and went out, and watching him Ed Campbell wished that he hadn't come. Big Bruce was a family man, and here in Grand Coulee they were playing for big stakes. Lacey Prymm had intimated that the man who ruled the big silver town, sooner or later ruled the territory, and the state if it became a state. He wasn't going to be stopped by a small town editor, or his peace-loving brother.

Ed went out on the street after awhile, and stood in front of the hotel. Jug McSween went past on the opposite side of the street a few minutes later, his broken nose bandaged, plaster tape across his face, holding it in place. McSween looked across at him, murder in his eyes. He kept walking.

Lige Henderson said from the hotel doorway, "You get a lot of satisfaction beating up McSween, Ed?"

"Some," Ed admitted. He leaned against one of the wooden awning posts and he watched a carriage go by.

"Reckon you know," Henderson said, coming over, "that McSween an' his two killer dogs will try to set you up, Ed."

"I figured that," Ed nodded. "Whose side you on, Lige?"

The old man frowned. The shame was

in his face. "I knew your father, Ed," he said. He walked on, stiff-legged, shoulders bent in, and Ed Campbell wondered why such a man should have taken the star in the first place. He wondered, too, how much Henderson knew, or if he were just a cog in the big machine which had been set up here. Many times before he'd been fooled by men like Lige Henderson.

THE day took a long time passing. In the afternoon Ed went over to Rob's office and scanned the newspapers Bruce had so studiously read the day before. It was a hot afternoon, and on a Sunday the streets were deserted, and it was only near dusk, with the opening of the saloons and the gambling houses, that the streets started to fill.

Ed had discovered one thing, which had undoubtedly been apparent to Bruce Campbell. It was the big lead which Rob had been following when he was stopped. A man by the name of Joe Links operated a small ore-carrying outfit, consisting of about a dozen big wagons. Links, according to Rob, had been forced out of business by the 'ring', and he did not like it. Although Rob didn't say it, there was little doubt in Ed's mind that the editor had been after the man, trying to get him to reveal information which might lead to the identification of the leader.

Links, living in Devil's Junction, a half dozen miles south of Grand Coulee, would be the first man Bruce Campbell would contact, and Ed confirmed this when he met Jeff. Jeff had seen Bruce riding out of Grand Coulee at one o'clock in the afternoon, and he'd been going up to Devil's Junction.

"Said he wanted to see a chap," Jeff stated.

Ed Campbell frowned. "Every hombre in this town," he said grimly, "knows why he went, too. He shouldn't have gone up alone."

"Somebody gunning for him?" Jeff asked tersely.

"We'll find out," Ed muttered, "when we get up there."

He had his gray stabled behind the hotel. Jeff Campbell had his black gelding there, too. They saddled and rode south

just as night fell and the lights were going on in the saloons.

Lige Henderson, standing in front of the jailhouse, saw them, going out. He looked, but he didn't say anything. They clambered across the bridge over the Creek, and then took the stage road north to Devil's Junction.

Ed remembered the place very well. There had been a gold strike there years ago, and then the vein had petered out. This had happened when he'd been a boy. A few people still lingered in the little town.

He'd come through it on the way to Grand Coulee, and the town hadn't changed much. There was a single street of empty houses, many of them falling to pieces. Because the town was on the stage road out of Grand Coulee, a saloon had been opened up there.

Ed had noticed that some people had gone back to Devil's Junction since the strike at Grand Coulee. A few of the houses had been occupied when he came through, largely because living quarters at Grand Coulee were hard to come by.

Riding south, Ed explained briefly concerning Joe Links, and the reason for Bruce's riding south to the town. Jeff, wise in the ways of frontier towns, shook his head grimly.

"Reckon he should o' taken us along, Ed," the ex-marshall said. "If they didn't want Rob to get too close to this Links chap, they ain't lettin' Bruce neither."

Out on the open road, Ed let the gray horse run. The big animal was well rested now and anxious to go, but Jeff's black kept pace with it all the way.

They passed the northbound stage three miles out of Grand Coulee, and the driver called down to them,

"Feller just shot up in Junction saloon. I'm sendin' the Doc back."

Ed heard Jeff's muttered curse, and then he had to whip the gray because Jeff was forging ahead of him on the black gelding.

THEY RODE into Devil's Junction at eight o'clock in the evening, and the only building lighted up was the saloon. Without a word, Jeff Campbell slipped

from the saddle, wrapped the reins around the hitch rack, and went up the steps, Ed behind him. There were about a dozen men in the saloon, hard-faced men, many of them obviously on the run. They looked at the two suspiciously.

Jeff went up to the bar and waved over a fat, grimy-faced bartender. The man took his time coming and Jeff's lean jaw started to tighten up. He was drumming on the wood with his fingers when the bartender came over and said sourly,

"What'll you have, mister?"

"There was a fellow shot up here this evening," Jeff said. "Where is he?"

The bartender looked at him and spat. "You ain't the doc?" he asked.

"No," Jeff said, his temper mounting.

"You ain't the law," the bartender growled. "Then——"

"Where is he?" Jeff grated.

"When I'm damned ready——," the bartender started to say, but he got no further. Jeff picked up a half-empty glass of beer and tossed the contents into the fat man's face.

The bartender let out a yelp and jumped back, pawing at his eyes. Beer was running down his face, dripping from his chin.

"You want me to blow this damned place up?" Jeff asked thinly. He'd stepped back a few feet from the bar and he was standing there, his hands on his hips, his right hand close to the butt of the six-gun.

Ed backed up a few feet and he looked at the other men in the room. He was smiling a little, but it was a cold smile.

The bartender wiped his face with a dirty rag he'd scooped up from below the bar. He looked at Jeff and at the gun on his hip. Some of the toughness went out of him. He jerked his head toward a door at the end of the bar.

"In the back room," he growled.

They started to walk that way, and then one of the men at the bar detached himself from the group he'd been with, and stood in their way. He was young and he was red-headed, and he'd been drinking. He grinned and he said, "Reckon you boys think you're pretty tough."

Ed Campbell put a big hand into the

red-head's face and pushed hard. The man staggered back into a rickety table, and when he fell on it the table collapsed and he went to the floor. He sat there, staring at Ed, not quite sure whether he ought to pull his gun.

Ed Campbell gave him plenty of time, and when he saw that the red-head had thought better of his act, he walked on after Jeff. They found Bruce lying on a cot, smoking a cigar, his left shoulder crudely bandaged. His face was white from the loss of blood.

Jeff said grimly, "Stage driver is sendin' the Doc up, Bruce. Anything we can do?"

"Not a damned thing," Bruce told him, "till that bullet comes out."

"We can go see the fellow who put it there," Ed observed.

Bruce laughed. "Shot came through the door," he said. "I was standing at the bar——"

"With a man named Links," Ed said, "and you should have had more sense, Bruce."

The older brother frowned. "Met him in the bar," he said. "Didn't get much time to talk to him before the shot came."

"Where is his place?" Jeff wanted to know.

"Bartender could tell you," Bruce said. "There's no rush now, Jeff."

Jeff laughed coldly. "Rob is shot through the head, and you get a bullet through the shoulder which was meant for your head, and there's no rush. There's a hell of a rush, Bruce."

"Wait'll the Doc gets here," Ed advised. "We can send him back to town. We'll look up Links together."

Jeff nodded. He went out to see the bartender, and he came back in a few minutes. He said, "Links has a place up at the end o' town. He didn't stay around long after Bruce was shot down. Reckon he knew they were after him, too."

AN HOUR LATER the Grand Coulee doctor, Fred Harkness, came in with his buckboard. Jeff and Ed waited until he'd taken out the bullet and rebanded the shoulder. They helped Bruce up on the buckboard and watched the doctor drive away with him. Then they started up the

street in the direction of Joe Links' place.

The single street was deserted in this direction. Weeds grew in the road, and none of the houses seemed to be occupied. They walked on the wooden boardwalk until it ended near a vacant lot, and then they stepped out into the road.

A full moon rode high in the sky lighting up the town, reflecting on the occasional glass windows which had not been broken. Jeff Campbell pointed to the light in the window of the house on the right side. He said quietly,

"That'll be the place, Ed."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a six-gun cracked from the alley between Links' house and the next building, a tumble-down saloon. Ed Campbell felt the slug nick the crown of his black sombrero, nearly lifting it from his head. He was reaching for his gun when he heard Jeff's gun roar twice.

"Git!" Jeff snapped.

Ed raced for the nearest building on his right, and Jeff ducked across the street and leaped into an alley. There were more shots from the alley near Links' house, but they were fast-moving targets now. Ed felt the wind of one bullet just before he dived through an open doorway.

He kept going through three rooms before plunging out through an open window. He had his gun in his hand now as he raced up in the direction of Links's place. He thought he saw a shadow slipping out of the alley and he fired twice. Then he lost his man in the shadows back here, and he held his fire for a few moments.

Somewhere, off to his right, horses started to run, their hoofs thudding against the sun-baked earth. He heard Jeff calling.

"All right—all right, Ed?"

"Right here," Ed said. He started forward again and he met Jeff at the head of the alley. The brother had crossed the street farther up, and come down toward the rear of the alley in the other direction. He'd wasted no time.

"Reckon they're gone," Jeff scowled. "You get a look at any of 'em?"

"Running too fast," Ed murmured. "Must be the same crowd knocked Bruce down. They were waiting for us."

Jeff looked up the alley. They could see the glow from Joe Links' lamp shining out in the alley from a small window there. Jeff said slowly,

"Let's have a look at Links."

Ed looked at him and laughed tersely. "Reckon that's all we'll get," he said, "a look."

Links was a small man, turning gray. He looked very peaceful, sitting in an old rocking chair near the table. The table was near the window, and the window pane was broken. There was a small hole in the back of Joe Links' head; there was not much blood, but he was very dead.

The door of the house was wide open, indicating that the killers had come into the house after murdering Links with the shot through the window. Walking toward the door, Ed noticed a small shiny object on the floor. He bent down to pick it up just as Jeff came over.

Jeff looked at it curiously, too. It was a small metal star which had been torn loose from a rider's spurs. It was solid silver.

"We find the man who lost that," Ed said quietly, "and we know who shot Links. We know then who shot at Bruce, and perhaps who killed Rob, also."

"This don't belong to Links," Jeff said, walking over to the side door. He pointed to a pair of spurs which undoubtedly belonged to the dead man. They had wheel-shaped rowels on them, and both were intact.

Ed dropped the little star into his shirt pocket. He said, "We'll have a look in Grand Coulee."

"I'm thinkin'," Jeff Campbell said slowly, "that the man who lost this rowel will be dead before morning."

WHEN THEY GOT back to Grand Coulee, Ed went up to the hotel room to see how Bruce had been fixed up. Jeff started the rounds of the saloons, looking for the man who'd lost the little star from his spurs.

Bruce was resting comfortably, and he listened to the story Ed had to tell with interest. He shook his head grimly when Ed told of finding Links murdered.

"I was worried about that," Bruce said. "I figured Links would be trying to get away after they shot at me. He didn't have too much time. Told me he figured on going east within a day or two."

"You think Links knew who was behind the ring?" Ed asked.

Bruce nodded. "They expected him to talk before he left, and that's the reason they shot him down."

Ed didn't say anything about the lost spur rowel, knowing that Bruce would worry if he knew that they were out looking for the killers tonight, and that they had a fairly good chance of finding them. With long lines of men up at the various Grand Coulee bars, it would not be too difficult locating a man with one rowel missing from his spurs.

"Be careful," Bruce warned. "Don't rush anything until I'm up again."

"We'll wait," Ed said dryly. He went downstairs and he met Marva Conroy just coming into the lobby. There was concern in the girl's eyes. She said,

"I saw them bringing your brother in, Mr. Campbell. How is he now?"

"He's resting," Ed told her. "There were no bones broken by the bullet." He paused and he added, "I'd appreciate it if you'd stop in once in a while to see how he is."

"Be glad to," Marva smiled, and she looked as if she meant it.

Ed went outside and he saw Jeff angling across the road toward him. Jeff's hat was pulled low down over his eyes. He said,

"You take every saloon this side, and then come back down the other side till you reach the Blue Bell. I understand McSween is down in the Mexican Hat. I'm headin' down there first."

"If you find it's McSween," Ed said, "wait till I get down. He's never alone."

Jeff nodded. "Two guns are better than one in this deal," he admitted. "Wait for me, too, if you find him."

"Check." Jeff turned away.

Instead of going up the street, Ed crossed to the Blue Bell first of all with the intention of checking up there, and then going on to the other saloons.

He found Lacey Prymm at his usual

position at the end of the bar. The fat man had a glass of beer waiting for him when he came over. He said,

"So Bruce ran into trouble."

"Bruce was always a little slow with a six-gun," Ed said.

Prymm shook his head gloomily. "In this kind of fight," he observed, "it's not the man who's fast with a gun; it's the man who looks through the back of his head that lives."

"We found Joe Links dead," Ed told him. "He was looking the other way when it happened."

Prymm frowned. "Links used to come into this house," he stated. "He was a good man."

Ed stood at the end of the bar, sipping the beer, looking down along the bar. He could see quite a few boots and spurs. None of them in his line of vision had a spur rowel missing. He saw Jack Conroy talking to a man at the far end of the big room, but Conroy had his back toward him.

Lige Henderson sat in at a card game a few yards away. Henderson looked at him and at Prymm, and then at his cards. Ed Campbell finished his drink and stepped away from the bar. He walked to the table and stood behind Henderson, apparently interested in the game, but examining the boots of every drinker along the bar. None of them had a rowel missing.

After a few minutes he drifted over toward the wall and he stood there, smoking a cigar, his eyes shifting around from table to table. Jack Conroy had gone up to the bar for a drink, and he was walking away now. Spotting Ed by the wall, he came over. He said,

"Tough about your brother, Campbell. I hope the rest of you will be more careful."

"We aim to be," Ed nodded.

WHEN CONROY WALKED away toward the door, Ed glanced down toward his boots. He'd been doing it unconsciously for the past ten minutes, watching every man coming into, or going out of the saloon. He looked at Conroy's right boot. The tall man had been riding and he wore spurs. The spurs had star-

shaped silver rowels, and the right spur rowel was missing.

Ed Campbell took the cigar from his mouth and looked at it; he looked down at the floor, and then over at Lacey Prymm at the bar. The silver rowel in his shirt pocket was the exact duplicate of the one he'd seen on Jack Conroy's boot. Conroy had been in Joe Links' house tonight.

Ed took his little star from his pocket and held it in his hand. He was thinking now of Marva Conroy, wondering how this could be. He went out on the porch and he saw Conroy standing there, looking out over the street. It was like a Saturday night now, with the kerosene flares sputtering and the barkers out in front of every establishment.

Jack Conroy was about to go down the steps when Ed's voice reached him.

"You over in Devil's Junction this evening, Mr. Conroy?" Ed asked quietly. He walked over and he leaned against one of the porch pillars.

Conroy looked at him. The kerosene flares illuminated his face. He said, "That's right, Campbell."

"You lost something," Ed said thinly. He held out his hand with the little silver rowel in it. The metal object caught the light from the flares.

Conroy took it from Ed's hand and looked at it curiously. Then he glanced down at his right spur as if noticing for the first time that the rowel was missing. He said,

"I believe it is mine, Campbell. Where did you find it?"

"In Joe Links' house," Ed told him, "a little while after he was murdered tonight."

Jack Conroy didn't say anything for some time. He was looking down at the star rowel, no expression on his face. Then he said, "I suppose you'd like to know what I was doing there."

"I was shot at when I went to see Links," Ed said. "My brother was nearly killed while he was talking with Links tonight. Maybe I got a right to know."

"Maybe you have," Conroy admitted, "but this is not the time nor the place to talk about it."

"Name the time and the place," Ed said.

"Meet me in the back room of the Emperor Saloon in thirty minutes," Conroy told him. He was speaking in a low voice so the other men on the porch couldn't hear him.

"I'll be there," Ed said. He watched Conroy step down to the walk and cross over to the hotel. Then he started up the street in search of Jeff. Jeff was coming out of the Stallion Saloon. He looked at Ed's face and he said grimly, "Who was it?"

"Jack Conroy," Ed told him.

Jeff frowned. "What else?"

"We're meeting him in the Emperor in half an hour," Ed said. "He has something to say to us."

"A trap?" Jeff asked softly, his eyes beginning to glisten.

"I'll find out," Ed said. The Emperor was a comparatively small saloon at the edge of town, and Conroy had undoubtedly selected it because they would be assured of some measure of privacy in the back room.

"Seen McSween around?" Jeff asked.

Ed shook his head. "Must be laying low," he said.

"That's the time to watch him," Jeff warned. "He's after your scalp, Ed. If he's in with Conroy on this business he'll have a gun on you when you step inside the Emperor."

"You'll have a gun on him," Ed said. "Reckon I'm not walking in there like a sitting duck."

"You'll be covered," Jeff assured him. "Kind o' hate to see Conroy mixed up in this business. He seemed like a nice chap."

"Rob was a nice chap, too," Ed said bitterly.

They stood in front of the Stallion Saloon for nearly a half hour, and then Ed said, "I'll move along."

"I'll be close by," Jeff promised him. He stood there, smoking a cigarette as Ed walked up the street.

ED PASSED the Blue Bell, and looking through the window he saw Lace Prymm at his accustomed place by the bar. Prymm was talking to Lige Henderson.

The Emperor Saloon was two blocks to the east, a run-down house with only a few patrons at the bar.

Ed stepped inside, located the door which led to the back room, and walked toward it. A bartender looked at him and nodded. He said, "Mr. Conroy is waitin' for you."

It wasn't a trap then. Ed stepped into the room confidently. Jack Conroy was sitting at a card table, facing the door. His black hat lay on the table beside him. He had a bottle and two glasses there, and he nodded and poured two drinks.

Ed sat down in the empty chair. Conroy said to him,

"Drink up."

Ed looked at the glass. He said, "I'll find out what you were doing at Links' place first."

Jack Conroy nodded. "You have a right to know," he said. "I had a talk with Links right before he was shot. I must have lost that spur rowel when I ducked through the door after that shot. I expected one at myself also. When I got around to the head of the alley they were gone. This must have happened ten or fifteen minutes before you came into Devil's Junction."

"Why did you want to see Links?" Ed asked.

"The same reason your brother had," Conroy told him. "I'm after the man behind this mining ring. Joe Links knew who it was."

Ed Campbell stared at the tall man. "You're fighting this ring, too?" he asked.

"United States marshal," Jack Conroy told him, "sent by the territorial government to smash the mining ring. I've been here for six months, running down every lead. I was working with your brother when he was killed."

"He knew?" Ed asked.

"He knew the night he was shot," Conroy said slowly, "and I knew, too, but I couldn't prove anything so I had to keep quiet. I have the proof now. I got it down in writing from Links, and I'm ready to move in on them now. I'll need your help and your brother's."

"Who is it?" Ed said tersely.

"A fat man," Conroy told him, "who

stands each night at the far end of his bar and watches the money pour into his tills, and that money is only chicken feed because his whole house is only a blind for the real business in which he is involved."

"Prymm!" Ed Campbell gasped.

"Lacey Prymm is the leader of this ring," Conroy said quietly. "I've been watching him for months. He works through smaller mine owners. His name is never on any papers, but he has more mine holdings than any man ever had in this country, and he's getting more all the time. He has Jug McSween and a dozen of his hired killers working for him. They're the ones who do the dirty work. They killed Rob and they killed Links, and they've run another dozen good men out of the territory. They keep piling the pressure on a man until he cracks and then they take over. In time Prymm will control every mine on the lode and he'll be the richest man in this country."

"Then Prymm was behind the killing of Rob," Ed said slowly.

"Beyond a doubt," Conroy told him, "and that wasn't the first killing. There have been others. I came to this town, posing as a mine operator, even purchasing a worthless mine, because I knew he'd be gunning for me. The fact that my sister accompanied me made it even more feasible. A United States marshal doesn't usually have his sister along on business, but Marva has been valuable in other cases. She hears things from other women --the kind of information a man can't get by himself."

"I think we'll look up Prymm," Ed said, getting up from the chair.

"And you'll be dead when you find him," Conroy observed. "He has the Blue Bell filled with hired killers all hours of the day. I intended to cable for deputies to help me when I go for him, but I don't know if I have enough time. I think he suspects that we're hot on his trail now."

"My brother's outside," Ed said. "Depurite the two of us and we'll go over there now."

Conroy smiled. "That'll make three," he said. "There'll be perhaps a dozen guns on us when we enter the Blue Bell."

"That's all right," Ed said.

Conroy smiled again. "Bring Jeff in," he said.

ED WENT OUT into the saloon and stepped on the porch outside. He expected to see Jeff waiting somewhere in the vicinity, if not in the saloon itself, but Jeff was nowhere in sight. There were three men across the street, watching him, and one of the three had a white smear across his face. It was quite dark and there were no lights on the other side, but Ed Campbell recognized that white smear as the bandages across Jug McSween's face.

Already, McSween's two henchmen were spreading out on either side of him, watching Jeff warily. McSween took a single step off the walk and stood in the deserted road, watching him, saying nothing.

Farther up the main street there was light and noise and many people. Down here at the edge of town it was quiet. Jeff could hear the voices of the few patrons inside the saloon. He still didn't see or hear Jeff, and he didn't understand that.

"All right, Campbell," Jug McSween called tensely.

"I see you," Ed said. He had his right hand down near the butt of the gun now, and he was studying the set-up. There was not much cover on this porch, and he had to watch three guns at once.

"Campbell," McSween called loudly, "we're arrestin' you for the killing of Joe Links down in Devil's Junction. Throw your gun out in the road."

Ed Campbell laughed. Something else fell into the road, making a tiny, fiery arc over Jug McSween's head, landing in the dust and sizzling out. It was a cigarette butt, and it had come from the tiny alley behind McSween. After the butt came Jeff Campbell's taunting voice,

"You want me on that charge, too, McSween?"

The Grand Coulee deputy stiffened. The two gun hands with him spun around, their guns half out of the holsters. Jeff said, "The first man pulls a gun is dead."

They couldn't see him in the alley and he held all the advantage now; and they had Ed in front of them. Ed said, "How about it, McSween? Still want me?"

"In time," McSween nodded.

Jack Conroy appeared in the doorway behind Ed. The United States marshal called quietly. "Your time's running out, Jug. Go back and tell Lace Prymm that, too."

McSween stared at him. He glanced back over his shoulder toward the alley in which Jeff Campbell was hiding, and then he turned and started to walk away. He walked in the direction of the Blue Bell. The two professional killers went with him.

Jeff came out of the alley and walked across the street. He looked at Ed and then at Conroy. Ed said to him thoughtfully, watching McSween walk up the street, "Lacey Prymm's our man, Jeff."

"Prymm!" the brother whispered. "Why, damn it!"

"We're going after him tonight," Ed continued. "Conroy, here, is a United States marshal. He's deputizing the both of us."

Jeff said, "It's takin' a hell of a long time to deputize us, marshal."

"No rush now," Conroy smiled grimly. "We're giving Prymm time to bring his whole crowd out. I'd like them all in front of me at one time."

THHEY started up the street ten minutes later, walking slowly, noticing how the crowds were gathering down in front of the Blue Bell. Every saloon and gambling house along the street was emptying. Men stood along the walks and on porches, watching them go by—three tall men with big guns on their hips, faces set grimly.

Already, Ed Campbell could see them on the porch of the Blue Bell—Jug McSween, eight or nine men with him, and then Lacey Prymm, smoking a cigar, standing with his back against one of the porch pillars, looking up the street. They were waiting, and they were not running.

"He figures he has plenty o' time to run," Jeff said, "after he puts us out o' the way."

"Every man to his own opinion," Conroy said. "We'll spread out when we get up close."

"I want Prymm," Ed said. "He's given me too many free beers after firing a bullet

through the back of Rob's head."

The crowd retreated as they came up closer, and then Conroy stepped out into the road when they were still about fifty yards from the building. Ed was on his left side and Jeff on the right. They kept coming down the middle of the road, passing through hundreds of spectators, and then a man came out of the crowd and fell in step with Ed. He was an elderly man and he walked with a stoop, and a silver star gleamed on his vest.

Ed said, "Lige, maybe you picked the losing side this time."

Lige Henderson shook his head. "Reckon it's the right side," he said. "McSween is mine."

Jeff Campbell laughed. "Ain't nobody left for us, Conroy, 'exceptin' about nine cheap gun-throwers."

"Henderson," Jack Conroy started to say, "you're not a young man anymore—"

"So I won't be losin' much," Lige Henderson said evenly, "if they get me. I'm the law in this town, Conroy. If there's trouble I'm in the middle of it from now on."

There was pride in his voice, a pride which the man had never displayed before, and Ed Cambell wondered where it had come from, and then he knew that every man had it, but with some it was buried—under fear, under guilt.

The four of them stopped in front of the hotel, directly opposite the Blue Bell. Lacey Prymm had not moved from his position. He was watching them idly as if they were four strangers passing in front of his establishment. Jug McSween was standing behind the porch railing, his hands in his hip pockets. The other men were spread out across the porch, all of them watching intently. The crowd had drawn way back now, nearly a half block up the street. There were no sounds except the spluttering of the kerosene flares in front of the Blue Bell.

Lacey Prymm said, "So you found out, Conroy."

"That's right," Jack Conroy told him. "Either toss your guns out into the road or fight the government, Prymm."

"I'll fight the government," Prymm said

without emotion. He was looking at Ed and he said quietly, "Hated like hell to put young Rob out of business, Ed, but he was all set to stop mine. I talked to him; I offered him money."

"You worship money, Prymm?" Ed Campbell asked tersely.

The fat man smiled. "You Campbells are all alike," he said. "What do you want, Conroy?"

"You," Conroy said. "Step down, Prymm."

"I'll make a deal with you," Prymm said. "You've come upon me very suddenly, Conroy, and I was not ready. I'll need twenty-four hours to straighten myself out and get away from Grand Coulee."

"You have twenty-four seconds," the United States marshal said, "to throw that gun into the road."

Lace Prymm shook his head as if in regret. He was looking at Ed Campbell now. He said, "Always hated to shoot a man down in his bed. If I don't get those twenty-four hours, Bruce Campbell will be dead three seconds after you boys open up with your guns."

HE was looking up toward the second floor of the hotel now. Ed Campbell felt a chill go through him. He turned his head and looked up toward Bruce's room. He heard Jeff's muttered curse, and he saw the two men sitting in the windows—two of Prymm's men. They had their guns drawn.

Lige Henderson said slowly, "I should o' figured he'd do something like that. I know Prymm."

"Twenty-four hours," Prymm said, "or start shooting now."

"In twenty-four-hours," Ed Campbell said, "he'll be out of the territory, and you'll never get near him again."

"He'll kill Bruce," Conroy murmured. "He means it."

"Your sister's in that room, too," Prymm called out. "She wouldn't like to see such a killing, Conroy."

Jack Conroy glanced up quickly, the color leaving his face. He called sharply, "Marva."

"I'm all right," Marva said. The voice came from the interior of the room.

"Let's step inside," Jeff Campbell said, "and talk it over. Prymm holds the good cards."

Lace Prymm was smiling at them as they backed up to the hotel porch and pushed into the lobby. Lige Henderson stood by the door, looking out. He said, "Prymm's gone inside."

Jeff lighted a cigar. He looked toward the staircase and he said, "Reckon there's no chance of bustin' in up there. They'll have the door locked an' they'll start shootin' when they hear us comin'."

"We'll have to work it some other way," Conroy said.

"And while we're waiting," Ed said, "Prymm is collecting every dollar in cash that he can, and the fastest horses, two for each man."

Conroy didn't say anything. Ed walked over to the door and stood beside Lige Henderson. He looked across the street. Jug McSween was talking with his men on the porch, but there were only five of them now, the others having gone.

"They'll be roundin' up their horses behind the Blue Bell," Henderson growled. "Prymm is takin' out whatever he can carry in cash. He'll be able to live like a damned king the rest o' his life."

"He's not away yet," Ed said. He walked back to where Conroy and Jeff were sitting. He said, "Jeff, see if you can get out of this place without being seen. I want you to get into a position where you can put a few shots through Bruce's window—up high, where they won't do any damage."

Jeff glanced at Conroy. "What happens then?" he asked.

"I'm going in there," Ed said quietly, glancing upstairs. "They'll be watching the window. I'll break through the door behind them."

Jeff looked at Conroy. He said, "What about us?"

"Some of McSween's men are out getting horses," Ed said. "This is the time to hit them. I'll follow you up."

"Think you can handle them upstairs?" Jeff wanted to know.

"I'll handle them," Ed said. "Wait'll I come down before you go." He went up the stairs from the lobby, walking heavily,

testing each step to see which ones squeaked, memorizing those steps. He stopped at the head of the stairs and he was less than six feet away from Bruce's door. He knew that one of the two guards was standing by that door, gun in hand, listening for his next move. He said, "Bruce—you all right?"

"All right," Bruce assured him.

"Don't come any closer," the McSween man snarled, "I'm shootin' through this damned door."

"Save your lead," Ed said dryly. He said, "I'll see you, Bruce," and he started down the stairs, deliberately treading on the ones that squeaked, making a noise as he went down. He said to Jeff, "All right," and he watched the brother slip out the side door into the alley.

Jack Conroy looked at him and walked to the front door with Lige Henderson. He said, "We'll start over when Jeff opens up, Ed. Good luck."

Ed nodded. He started up the stairs again, this time doing it very slowly, avoiding the steps which squeaked badly, testing each one before he put his weight on it. When he reached the top he stopped, sliding the Colt gun from the holster. He measured the distance to the door and then he braced himself for the charge. He was six feet away, and it would take two long strides before he reached it. Those two strides should give him the momentum to crash through.

Inside, he could hear the two guards talking in low tones. He counted up till ten, and then Jeff's gun started to bang. There was the crash of shattered glass inside the room.

LUNGING FORWARD, Ed hit the door with his left shoulder, tearing it loose from the hinges, breaking the lock. He went through straight toward the window where one of the guards was looking out from the corner, his gun braced against the window sill.

The man was whirling around when Ed hit him across the skull with the long barrel of the Colt. The window was open, and the McSween man fell across the sill, half-hanging out.

The second man had been at the other

window. He'd leaped away from it when Ed tumbled into the room, and he had his gun leveled when Bruce Campbell scooped up a water pitcher on the table next to his bed and hurled it at him.

The pitcher struck the gunman a glancing blow on the chest. It was enough to spoil his aim. His slug instead of driving through Ed's body went into the wall near the window. Ed Campbell dropped him with the first bullet. He grinned at Bruce and at Marva Conroy, who was crouching near Bruce's bed, and then he tumbled through the window out onto the porch shed.

Lige Henderson and Conroy were going across the road. Jeff was running from the shelter of a doorway on the other side of the street and was heading for the porch. The guns were beginning to boom. A man was down on the porch of the Blue Bell. The others had dropped down behind the frail shelter of the porch railing and were firing over the top. McSween was in the doorway of the saloon, his gun in his hand.

Ed fired from the roof of the porch, his bullet smashing the glass of the batwing door, inches away from McSween. When Jug McSween looked that way, lifting his gun to return the fire, Lige Henderson shot him through the forehead.

Henderson was walking straight forward into the gun fire, two steps ahead of Conroy. A bullet from the porch hit him and he staggered, but he regained his balance and kept going. He fired through the railing, dropping another man, and then Jeff, with a whoop, came in from the other angle, the north side of the porch. He fired three times through the railing, and then he vaulted over the top of it.

Ed was going down the porch pillar to the ground when Bruce's gun started to boom from the window behind him. The big man had gotten out of bed and picked up the gun of the dead man.

Henderson went down just as Ed reached the ground and started across the road. Two men were still up on the porch, but they bolted through the doors, scrambling over McSween's body.

Jack Conroy and Jeff Campbell went through the doors together, with Ed coming close behind them. The Blue Bell had

emptied when they'd started up the street, and it was empty now.

One of the gunners had been going up the stairs, but he turned to fire a shot at them. Jeff picked the man off the stairs, and as the body tumbled down, he started up, Conroy following him.

Ed Campbell had a different idea. Jeff and Conroy were assuming that Prymm was upstairs in his private office. Ed had the feeling that he was already down in the yard behind the saloon, ready to ride out.

Running around the bar, he ducked through a small door which led into one of the back rooms. Beer barrels were stacked up here, and he nearly fell over one as he raced for the door which opened on the yard.

THREE was a small loading platform here, raised about four feet from the ground. Just beyond the platform were three horses, and behind them two pack horses. Lacey Prymm was getting into the saddle when Ed came out on the platform. The two men were less than fifteen feet away from each other.

Another man was running from the stable, and he hadn't seen Ed as yet. A third man was holding the two pack animals.

Prymm had his gun out. He looked at Ed and smiled. He said, "You damned Campbells," and then he fired. His slug struck a beer barrel.

Ed's bullet struck him in the chest, shaking him up as he sat on the horse. He started to rock, but he didn't go down. Ed held his fire. The man who'd been running from the stable, stopped, and dropped to one knee. He was squatting like that when a bullet from the upper floor tumbled him over.

The man holding the horses let go of the reins and darted up the alley, knowing that the fight was over. Lacey Prymm still sat on his horse, head bent down on his chest now, the gun slack in his hand.

He died that way. When the horse moved he slipped from the saddle, his heavy body hitting the ground with a sickening thud. Ed Campbell turned and walked back inside.

Jeff and Conroy were coming down the stairs. Jeff was whistling, ejecting spent cartridges from his gun. Conroy's left arm was limp, and blood was trickling from his fingers. He said, "Just nicked a little above the elbow. It'll be all right."

Jeff said, "Bruce got one from the window. Didn't know he could shoot that straight."

They went out and they saw Marva with Lige Henderson. The sheriff was kneeling in the dust. His hat had fallen from his head and he looked old and wan, but he smiled when they came up. He said, "Kept in it as long as I could."

He had a bullet through the side and another one through the right leg. Jack Conroy said to him,

"You'll be the law in this town for a good many years to come, Lige."

"Lord willin'," Henderson said.

They got him over to the hotel, and then Ed and Marva went up to see Bruce. They found him sitting on the edge of the bed, the gun still in his hand. He smiled weakly and he said, "Who was I shooting at, Ed?"

"You hit the right ones," Ed told him. "It was Prymm. He's dead."

Bruce Campbell nodded soberly. "So we can go home," he said. "You can go back to your Indian chasing in Mexico, Ed."

Ed Campbell didn't say anything. As he was going downstairs with Marva a few minutes later, the girl said to him, "Jack and I will stay in Grand Coulee a few weeks until his arm heals. Are the Indians waiting for you, Mr. Campbell?"

Ed looked at her. "Indians can always take," he murmured. "They're good at that."

Marva Conroy was smiling. "I haven't been on a horse since coming to Grand Coulee, and I love to ride."

"Why haven't you been out?" Ed asked her.

"I dislike riding alone," Marva said primly.

Ed Campbell moistened his lips. "Reckon we can take care of that," he reflected. "I'll be waiting for you in the lobby tomorrow morning."

"I—I'll be there," Marva told him.

Ed watched her walking across the lobby. He was thinking contentedly, *The Apaches can wait*. He'd waited a long time himself.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of ACTION STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1949.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Jerome Bixby, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the ACTION STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation) etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 337, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Jerome Bixby, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) JEROME BIXBY,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of September, 1949.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1950.)

SINALOA STAGE

By KARL KASKY

Easy pickin's, Reardon argued; a fat strong-box, no shotgun messenger, clear getaway. But old Whip Lyons was too experienced an owlhoot to tackle the deadly

FRANK REARDON LOOKED over the early morning campfire at Whip Lyons, and hated him. Whip Lyons . . . the man who had lifted the box from forty-odd Concords. An old duffer with a grizzled, gray beard and so ancient his bones squeaked like saddle leather when he walked.

With a soiled sleeve, Frank wiped the yellow tobacco ring from his lips. So this was the most talked about outlaw in the Southwest. The man who could rob a stage, disappear into thin air, and then weeks later come back and rob the same stage again. Nobody had ever said that Lyons could make washers out of silver dollars with his six-shooter, or even necessarily come out on top in a saloon brawl. But neither did anyone ever call Whip Lyons a fool. Owlhoot savvy had earned him his name. A lawman who had once trailed Lyons for two weeks only to return empty handed, had remarked disgruntledly that the old lobo was "smart as a whip." From then on he was known as Whip Lyons.

Frank tossed his tin coffee cup into the brush and spat into the fire. He hated this old outlaw. A month ago he'd asked Lyons to let him be a partner and get some of this easy dough, too. After all, he'd notched his gunsights on a couple of men, but Whip Lyons didn't seem to care about that. Whip had said, "What you need to play this game is brains. A lot of marbles in your conk." Brains were all right, Frank told himself. But now all Whip wanted to do, it seemed was lie around out here in the rimrock and get fat.

Angry lights began to dance in Frank's eyes and his lips curled back. "You're yellow," he said flatly.

Whip Lyons puffed on his corn cob

pipe and his eyes—oddly young for such an old face—sparkled. "No, son," he replied. "Just smart."

"You call this smart? This lying around out here in the rimrock for two weeks? If you had any guts we'd have knocked over that Sinaloa stage and been guzzling tequila and bouncing señoritas on our knees in some cantina across the border by now."

A smile broke through Whip Lyons bush of gray whiskers. "You ain't been around long, kid. I been playing this game for twenty years. In all that time the law ain't got a thing to stretch me fer. Leastwise, nothin' they can prove. You've been on one job with me. The Carson stage. Did we have any trouble?"

Frank got to his feet and pushed down on the two bone-butted forty-fives belted about his slim waist. "Just the same, we ain't gonna get rich lying around up here with the lizards. We been watchin' that stage for two weeks now. I say we stop it this morning. It's easy. All we've gotta do is plant behind that tall butte over there, wait'll that mud wagon gets across the river into the wet sand where the wheels drag down, then jump her. Top o' that, they ain't got no shotgun messenger. I'm tellin' you, it's easy."

Whip Lyons glanced at the tall butte about two hundred yards to his left. "That's it," he said, with a chuckle. "It's too easy. I've stopped every stage in these parts. Some of 'em twice. Some three and four times. They're layin' fer me. They know I'm gonna try the stage for Sinaloa next. That's why they've made it easy like that . . . nobody ridin' shotgun." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Look at their trail. It used to run across the lava beds over yonder. Now they're trackin' through that wet sand past the



Just as he sank his spurs, he heard the shot . . .

river. It's too easy, I say."

"And I'm sayin you're yellow. Your bones are creakin' and you're gettin' spooked in your old age."

The old man shrugged. "Have it your own way, kid."

Frank lipped a quirly into shape and scraped a match across his saddle-worn levis. He moved behind Whip Lyons. "I'm thinkin' you ain't got no more plans for me," he said. "You been waitin' for a chance to drygulch me. I'm thinkin' I'd better cash you in. I can handle that Sinaloa stage by myself."

Whip Lyons turned in surprise to look at Reardon. Instead he stared into the barrel of one of Frank's Colts. "What the hell, kid. You gone loco?"

Frank thumbed back the hammer of the gun. "What do you say now? Do we stop 'er this morning? Or do I bring you to the end of the trail?"

"You're a fool, Reardon."

A cruel smile knotted Frank's lips.

"Mebbe," he said, "And mebbe not!" He lifted his thumb and let the hammer snap forward.

SITTING his pony on the rimrock high above the stage trail, Frank twisted another cigarette. He let the smoke trail, out his nostrils as he watched the Sinaloa stage rattle into sight.

It bounced down the trail between spired buttes to the river. Only one man had his feet dangling in the boot. The driver. Frank couldn't see any passengers inside. That was both good and bad. Good because he wouldn't have anyone else but the driver to worry about, and bad because he wouldn't have any extra pockets to rifle.

He spat his cigarette to the ground and unhooked his knee from the saddle horn. Giggling his pony into a gallop he followed the rimrock to a point opposite the wet sand flats.

The Concord sloshed through the river to the other side, and slipped into the

deep wheel ruts in the sand. Pulling one of his sixguns, Frank sent his pony down the slope after the stage.

He snapped two shots at the rocking Concord. The driver turned and glanced back, then drove his boot against the brake and hauled back on the ribbons.

As Frank reined in, he shot a quick glance to the inside of the coach. His eyes hadn't fooled him. There were no passengers. The driver was alone. "Push over the box," he growled.

The driver slid the express box to the edge of the boot. Frank pulled the box from the boot and balanced it across his lap. He glanced at the driver. "Chuck down that scatter-gun, too," he ordered.

The driver tossed the double-barrel shotgun to the sand. Frank thought he detected a faint smile on the driver's lips, but he wasn't sure. "I'll be movin' on, if you don't mind," the driver said.

Frank watched the Concord sway through the deep ruts until it became a mere speck. A crooked smile creased his lips. "Whip Lyons," he thought. "How could an old fossil like that knock over so many stages without any guts? Whip said this was easy. Too easy." Frank's smile broadened. "It sure as hell was." He patted the box.

He loped the pony back toward the rimrock. The box was heavy and its contents rolled from side to side, making a dull, thudding sound. "Probably silver," Frank mused.

When he reached high ground, he dismounted and laid the box on the ground. He went to work on the lock immediately. With the butt of one of his Colts he

smashed at the lock. It banged noisily from side to side, but did not break.

After several minutes of pounding and not getting anywhere, he stopped to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Then he saw what the trouble was. The Express Company had soldered the lock shut. That meant only one thing to Frank. It was a through safe. There was plenty in that box. He was going to get more out of this than he'd figured on.

Taking a step backward, he leveled both Colts on the lock. Bullets would make short work of it. For a long moment he aimed carefully, then gently squeezed the triggers.

BACK near the campfire, an old man with a bushy gray beard was pulling himself into the saddle cinched down on his crowbait pony. He had a large splotch of red under his armpit, but it lied about the true severity of the wound. Reardon's bullet had hit a rib and glanced out, and he'd lost a lot of blood. But Whip knew where to find a doctor he could trust, and in less than a week, he figured to be back in the rimrock waiting for another stage.

Just as he sank his spurs, he heard the shot . . . and then the explosion that followed which rocked the whole hillside.

Glancing up, he saw the tall butte crumple to the ground like an undermined sand hill. Only one thing was powerful enough to do that. Dynamite. He nudged his pony away from the campfire and pointed its nose toward town.

"Just too damn easy," he whispered to himself.



A Fiction House Magazine





FANCY DRAW

By MARVIN J. JONES

If the game is bullets wild, and you
fill your hand with Sam Colt's Aces,
just make damned sure of one thing:
Call the right man!

JASPER KERRICK RODE INTO Lario, with his son Danny, on a Monday and put up at the hotel. Jasper was a big, gaunt, fierce looking man, dark-eyed and black bearded; but for all his bigness, there was a catlike grace to his walk. Danny was ten, or thereabouts. He was a pint sized button with blue eyes, blonde hair and long, curved eyelashes. He looked like a girl, although it seemed that Jasper was dead set he shouldn't because the kid

*A quiet voice came from the door . . .
"Yes. Hank Smith drew first."*

was wearing a gunbelt and gun, and the weight of the gun just about cut him in two. Jasper wore two guns and the black butts of them were well worn, as though they had seen a lot of handling. People who saw the two ride in took a second look at Jasper after they saw the guns.

Jasper and Danny did a little looking around and at the end of the week Jasper bought the Coonskin brand from old Hiram Crocker, hired a dull witted cowboy called True Slim and went to work fixing up the property.

The three of them repaired the ramshackle buildings and built a new corral that winter. When Spring came, they fenced in a portion of the flats and put in alfalfa. Folks wondered how they got so much done. Danny was pretty small and True Slim wasn't much account. There was something about Jasper Kerrick, too, that people had noticed. There was something the matter with the big man's hands—or maybe it was his arms. Anyway, folks had noticed that he handled his hands kind of awkwardly. In a way, though, that sort of tied in with the two guns—as if the big man wasn't used to working with his hands. There was a lot of speculation about it in Lario that winter and the next summer.

THE following winter was a good, hard one. The blizzards swept down from the mountains, driving the cattle before them and leaving the ground heavy with snow half the time and coated with ice the rest. It was the ice that made Jasper Kerrick's alfalfa come in handy. Jasper sold hay to those of his neighbors who could afford it and bought cattle from those who couldn't. There wasn't any bad feeling, because he sold at a fair price and bought the same way. Jasper came out way ahead, though and the following Spring he took over Les Faulkner's place.

The next year, Jasper hired two more hands and did some fencing. People wondered at the way he went about it. There were a couple of drift fences and there were a couple of stretches that didn't seem to serve much purpose. Jasper's idea was clear, a couple of years later, when he bought out the McCoy's and young Lar-

son. Jasper lengthened the fences a little and strung a connecting fence across one end—right along the border of the Double Yoke.

Larion wondered how Big Bill Linahan was going to take it, but Big Bill didn't say a word. The fence didn't mean anything to Bill that year, because the graze was good all over the country. It was two years later, when young Danny was fourteen, that the trouble began and Big Bill began to brood about the fence.

It was a dry year and it caught Big Bill with too many cattle, not enough graze and a bad market. There had been years like it before and Big Bill's Double Yoke cows had oozed over on the adjoining ranges and made out. This year, they were stopped by fences—Jasper's fences. Big Bill began to grumble and as the summer wore on, he made threats. He wouldn't come out and say flatfooted why he resented the fencing—that wasn't Big Bill's way—but he brooded over the thing until he thought he had a reasonable excuse to jump Jasper about it. He ran across Jasper, True Slim and young Danny in town one day and stopped them.

"Kerrick," he told the black bearded man, flatly, "you've been doing a lot of unnecessary fencing—and it ain't neighborly. Comes a bad winter and a hard blizzard, my cows are going to pile up and freeze!"

Jasper Kerrick pulled a little at his long black beard, his eyes getting darker and almost troubled. Both Danny and True Slim just stood there, waiting to see what Jasper would say. Finally, the big man said mildly, "Comes a bad winter, Linahan, and a blizzard, and your cows pile up against my fence—I'll cut it 'fore any of them freeze."

Jasper said it like it was a promise and turned away as if that was all there was to it and he was anxious to avoid any trouble. His answer took a lot of the starch out of Big Bill, but the Double Yoke owner voiced the threats he had been grumbling about for months.

"I ain't gonna take any chances, Kerrick," he called after the three of them, "I'm telling you that, now!"

Jasper Kerrick didn't answer that. He

and young Danny and True Slim kept right on to where their horses stood, mounted and rode out of town. Big Bill Linahan glared after them until they were out of sight. Then, he went into Red Sacker's saloon, had four stiff jolts of whiskey and wound up at a corner table, talking to Hank Smith. When he left the saloon, Hank went with him and they rode off toward the Double Yoke together. Folks knew there was going to be trouble then, because Hank was a left-over gunman from the sheep war.

The trouble didn't last long. Two days later, Jasper Kerrick, Danny and True Slim rode into Lario, late in the afternoon. Trailing along behind them was Hank Smith's horse—and Hank Smith—his legs dangling over one side of the saddle and his arms hanging down on the other. He was a very dead Hank Smith. There was one bullet hole in him and it was right between his eyes.

JASPER KERRICK led the procession down Main Street and they drew rein in front of Sheriff Fletcher's office.

"Fred!" Jasper called, staying in his saddle.

Fred Fletcher came out of his office, yawning and rubbing his eyes. When he saw Hank draped over the saddle, he rubbed his eyes some more. And at that time, Big Bill Linahan came charging out of the general store and up the street, his face looking kind of grey. He drew up alongside the sheriff, his big chest heaving from the running and his hand twitching over the butt of his forty-five. For a minute, nobody said anything, then Jasper cleared his throat.

"We'uns caught this fellow cutting our fence," he explained quietly.

Fred Fletcher got a little red in the face. He scratched his head and stole a glance at Big Bill Linahan. What he saw in the Double Yoke owner's face didn't help much. Big Bill was mad—and he had a lot of influence. It was a touchy situation, but the sheriff, being a blunt man, handled it bluntly.

"How come you killed him?" he wanted to know.

Jasper Kerrick hesitated ever so slightly

and then he said, "He drew first."

The sheriff scratched his head again and saw, out of the corners of his eyes, that Big Bill Linahan's face was slowly turning purple. Quite a crowd of people had collected by this time and they all gaped at the black bearded man. Hank Smith had been just about the fastest gunhand to hit that part of the country—maybe the fastest—the element of doubt entering into it, because there were some who thought Big Bill Linahan might be faster. The two of them had been a little cautious about finding out.

The crowd looked at Jasper, at the twin, black butted guns and there was awe and respect in their faces. The sheriff considered the matter closed, but not so Big Bill Linahan. Big Bill's eyes were narrowed and it was easy to see he thought Jasper was lying. The sheriff didn't like the look Big Bill was getting, but he didn't see a whole lot he could do about it. Hank shouldn't have been cutting Jasper's fence in the first place,

"Hank drew first—hell!" the Double Yoke owner exploded suddenly, unable to control his rage. "He had no reason to! I just sent Hank up there to see if there was a break in the fence. I been missing some cattle."

That was a lie. The sheriff knew it was a baldfaced lie, Jasper knew it and everybody else knew it. There wasn't any doubt in anybody's mind but that Big Bill had sent Hank to cut the fence. The problem was—was Hank murdered carrying out the order? Big Bill thought so and the Double Yoke swung a lot of weight around Lario. The lawman pondered the thing, knowing he was ringed around with dynamite and then a happy thought occurred to him.

"How about it, Slim?" he asked suddenly, "Did Hank draw first?"

It was a good question and a simple way out of the dilemma. True Slim had never been known to lie. He was a homely, runty, bow-legged ranny, slow thinking and slow acting. In fact, more than a few thought he was simple. However, True Slim had always taken a quiet pride in telling the truth, regardless of what the results might be. Everybody looked at

Sheriff Fletcher with new respect and he expanded under the admiration of his quick-wittedness.

"Did Hank draw first?" he demanded importantly, again, although there wasn't any need of it, because True Slim always thought a question all the way through before answering it and he wasn't through this one yet. Asking him the same question again only got him confused, and it looked like he wouldn't be able to answer at all. Then, he said quietly,

"Hank drew first."

That settled it. There was the truth. True Slim had never been known to lie. The sheriff was satisfied and the crowd was satisfied and even Big Bill half-believed it. Big Bill was sheet white and his hand twitched over his gunbutt, but he didn't draw. He was afraid to draw. Jasper Kerrick was a fierce looking man, and though it didn't seem logical to Big Bill that those awkwardly hanging arms could flash into a speed that would down Hank Smith, there was Hank, bellied on his saddle dead. Big Bill didn't want to believe it, but he had to. He took his hand away from the butt of his gun and watched silently, as Jasper, Danny and True Slim turned their horses about and rode out of town.

THE NEXT SUMMER was as dry as the one before and the market was even worse. Jasper Kerrick sold a few cattle, but with his hay and buying a little grain, he held most of them over. Here and there, smaller ranches folded up. Jasper bought a couple of these and added them to the land he already held. Jasper Kerrick was a man to be reckoned with now. He owned as big a spread of land as the Double Yoke and he was a lot better off, because things had gone very badly with Big Bill Linahan's Double Yoke. Big Bill took a licking that first dry year and a beating on this one. He began hitting the bottle more than was good for him. When he was drunk, he'd curse Jasper Kerrick, but he wasn't too loud about it. He hated Jasper—and he was afraid of him, too.

It was toward the end of that summer that something happened to start bringing things to a head, and the thing that hap-

pened was a couple of hardcase strangers drifting into town. They drifted in and sort of made Red Sacker's saloon their headquarters. They drank a little and gambled a little, but they didn't talk much. They didn't bother anybody and they did spend money. Sheriff Fletcher checked through his want file and he had nothing on them. Nobody knew where they came from or who they were. They didn't say—and no one asked them.

Hanging around Red Sacker's the way they did, they were bound to see about as much of Big Bill Linahan as anybody.

The three of them played poker together, had a few drinks together and then before people had gotten used to seeing the two strangers, Big Bill had them in a corner and all three of them had their heads together. After that little conference, they all rode out toward the Double Yoke. It didn't look too good—the Double Yoke hiring those two gunhung drifters—but there wasn't anybody anxious to mix into Big Bill's business.

That was the last Lario saw of the two hardcase strangers for three days. On the third day, Jasper Kerrick and Danny rode into town and up to Fred Fletcher's office. There were two horses trailing them and each horse had a dead man slung over the saddle. They had been shot from the front—through the head.

"They were cutting our fence," Jasper explained to the sheriff. "We was trying to get 'em to come along peaceful like, but they wouldn't have none of it."

FRED FLETCHER'S face got an awful funny look on it, but he didn't ask Jasper for the details. He took the big man's word that it had been give and take. The Coonskin brand carried a lot of weight, now and regardless of just how the fracas happened, it appeared that Jasper wasn't the type of man who cared to quibble. But after Jasper and Danny rode out of town, the sheriff and the coroner looked the dead men over pretty carefully. One of them had fired one shot and the other's gun was clean. It didn't look right, the coroner told the sheriff, but he went along with the lawman.

Big Bill turned grey as a ghost when

he got the news and then his rage rumbled out in a storm. He roared into town on a lathered-up horse, flung himself into Fred Fletcher's office and demanded that the lawman arrest Jasper for murder.

The sheriff got around it by telling Big Bill to go ahead and swear out a warrant. Judge Kearney got around it by telling the Double Yoke owner he couldn't do it without some evidence to prove it was murder. And Big Bill wound up in Red Sacker's saloon, drunk—and talking.

What he had to say was interesting. He said Jasper Kerrick had murdered the two strangers—as well as Hank Smith. He said Jasper was a two bit gun-marshall who had been run out of Kansas. That bit of news didn't startle the people of Lario much. They had figured Jasper was handy with guns when he first rode into town and he had proved it since. They didn't know how it happened he had been run out of Kansas, but as long as Jasper had stopped running, there wasn't anybody anxious to get him started again.

Big Bill got drunker and madder, when he couldn't get anybody interested in his case. He didn't seem to mind the two strangers making Boothill—it was the killing of Hank Smith that kept festering away at him. And then, when Big Bill got good and drunk, he let something slip. He said that Jasper had had an accident and gotten both his wrists broken—and that was why he had left Kansas—because he had lost his gun magic.

People pricked up their ears when Big Bill said that. By that time, they had figured that the hardcase strangers had been from Kansas, too, and that was where Big Bill had gotten his information. It sort of all tied in together. Jasper Kerrick's arms—or hands—did seem kind of awkward—and unless the strangers had thought Jasper had lost his gun magic, they wouldn't have been willing to hire out to the Double Yoke and mix things up with the Kansas gun marshal. Folks listened, but they didn't give Big Bill any satisfaction. In the end, they as much as hinted to Big Bill that it seemed fairly obvious that Jasper Kerrick hadn't lost all of his gun magic

Big Bill Linahan didn't believe it. He

said you could look at the way Jasper handled his hands and see that they were stiff. He said that Jasper was a Kansas killer and that he had sneaked up on poor old Hank, gotten the drop on him and then shot him in cold blood. Big Bill said, too, that True Slim had lied. He pointed out that True Slim had never told a lie before, but he had never had any special reason to lie before, either. The Double Yoke owner claimed that Jasper had hired True Slim in the begining because Slim was handy and kept him on because he was afraid Slim would tell the truth about Hank Smith's killing. Big Bill wanted to know who in Lario—or Hell for that matter—would give True Slim a steady job, unless there was some reason behind it.

Big Bill Linahan had a pretty good argument and he swayed quite a few people to his way of thinking. There was some talk about getting ahold of True Slim and having the truth out of him—or else. Nothing came of it, though. There wasn't anybody anxious to cross horns with Jasper. That left the thing squarely up to Big Bill. He had to put up or shut up and he had gone pretty far to back out, now. It was just a question, then, as to how soon the two of them would cross paths.

JASPER KERRICK didn't come into town any oftener than necessary. He never had been one to hang around town. But when he did come in, he liked a beer or two. Sooner or later, he was bound to run across Big Bill Linahan—and he did. On Tuesday afternoon, he walked into Red Sacker's saloon, True Slim at his heels and ordered beer for the two of them. About the time they got their glasses in their hands, Big Bill Linahan's voice came from a rear table. "There's the skunk that killed poor Hank, now!" he said, in a voice that carried all over the saloon.

There had been a buzz of noise in the saloon, up until then, but with Big Bill's words, there was a dead silence. Everybody looked at Jasper, waiting to see what the black bearded man would do.

Jasper Kerrick didn't do anything and he didn't say anything. His shoulders stiffened a little and he raised his glass to

his lips. He did take a pretty good sized swallow of the beer, but that was all.

Big Bill had taken on quite a load of whiskey courage and Jasper, acting like he was, gave the Double Yoke owner a lot more. Big Bill scraped his chair back from the table and got to his feet, his face ugly and sneering.

"I'll tell you just how you did it, too," he said loudly, starting for the bar and his hand brushing the butt of his forty-five. And then he told Jasper what he had told nearly everybody else in town—that Jasper had sneaked up and gotten the draw on Hank, and then shot him down.

The men lined up at the bar began to get out of the way. True Slim was standing right next to Jasper and it took him quite a bit longer to grasp the situation, but when he did, he fell all over himself getting away from Jasper. That looked kind of funny, because True Slim shouldn't have been so scared if the big man was good enough to down Hank Smith and a couple of hardcase gunman. True Slim not only got away from Jasper, though, he looked across the room to the door, as if he wanted to get clear out of the place.

Jasper Kerrick set down his beer, swung around slowly and faced the Double Yoke owner. Underneath the beard, Jasper's face was quite pale—and that was an astonishing thing, too. Big Bill Linahan laughed suddenly—a quick, harsh laugh that jarred the whole room. He saw that Jasper was afraid. Seeing that fear made Big Bill's eyes gleam with triumph.

"You murdered Hank Smith!" Big Bill snarled again, "and the reason you got away with it was 'cause True Slim lied for you. Then, you murdered two more men and got away with that, too, because people thought you must be good with those two damned guns! But you ain't that good, Kerrick, and I aim to prove it! Go for your guns, Kerrick! Damn you! Go for your guns!"

Jasper Kerrick put out one hand in a sudden gesture, as though he would ward off a blow. Then, he saw it wouldn't be any use, because Big Bill's hand had started downward. A sudden panic came into Jasper Kerrick's face and his hands grabbed for his own guns.

Right then, everybody saw that Big Bill Linahan had been dead right when he claimed that Jasper Kerrick might have been a gunman back in Kansas, but he wasn't anymore. Jasper went after those twin, black-butted guns like each of his fingers were a thumb. He never cleared leather before Big Bill's forty five blasted out its first slug. The bullet caught Jasper in the pit of the stomach and he quit trying to draw. Big Bill cursed, thumbed back the hammer of his forty-five and put his second shot through the big man's head.

FOR the space of five seconds there wasn't a sound in the saloon. Nobody had expected Jasper to go down so easily and it was easy to see, from Big Bill's face, that he hadn't expected it either. Then, Big Bill Linahan's breath came out in a sudden whoosh of sound. He shoved his gun back in its holster and swung to face True Slim. Slim saw what was coming and tried to get away, but the Double Yoke owner sprang at him like a big cat.

"So Hank drew first!" Big Bill shouted savagely, and his open hand smacked across True Slim's jaw, knocking the dull-witted waddy half the length of the bar.

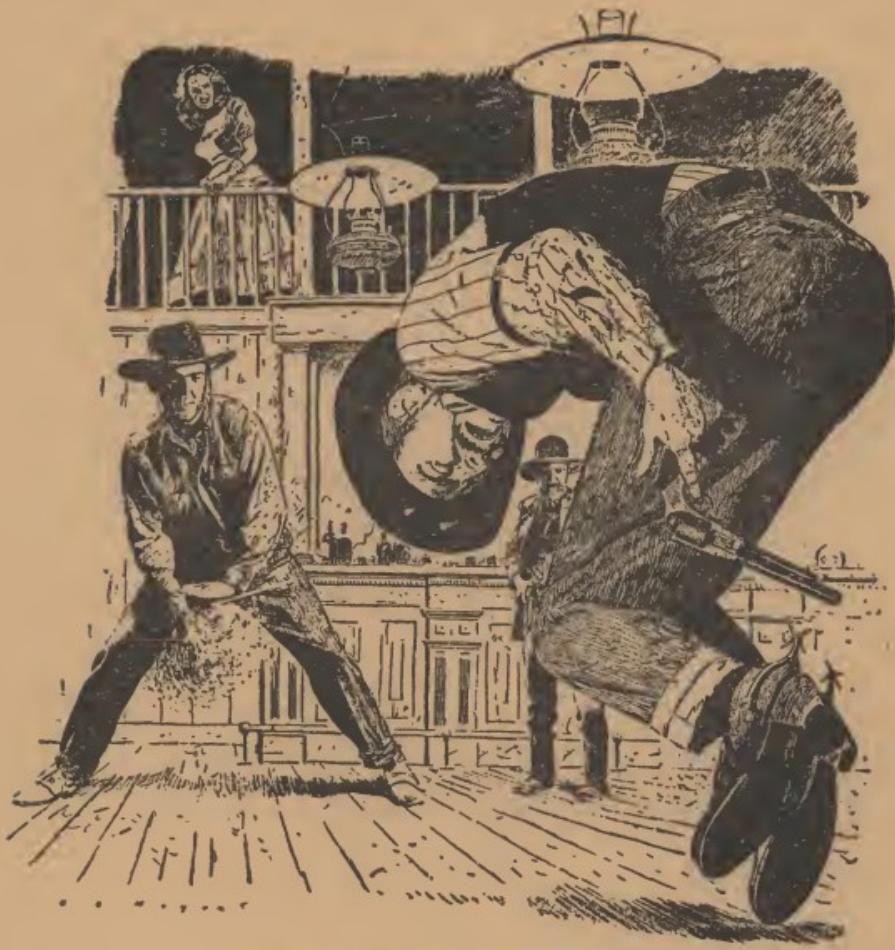
The blow sent True Slim rolling and Big Bill gave him no chance to get back on his feet. He went after Slim with his boots, calling him by every obscene name he could lay tongue to. True Slim scuttled around the room like a rabbit, but the Double Yoke owner's boots kept him from getting out the door. Slim was sobbing and whining, but he got no mercy from Big Bill.

Then, when Big Bill had him half kicked to pieces and everybody's face was pale and sick, the Double Yoke owner stopped and let True Slim lay there.

"Now, damn you! Tell the truth!" Big Bill told him savagely, his eyes bloodshot and face working. "Did Hank draw first?"

Nobody saw the batwings swing inward. They were all staring at True Slim, waiting to hear his answer. They didn't expect to hear the answer from anyone else, but a quiet voice came from the door. It said, "Yes. Hank Smith drew first."

(Concluded on p. 64)



He crouched low, fanning the hammer . . .

CAT'S-PAW KILLER

By CARL KENT

He sat, hand on his gun, staring at the crowded bar, the laughing couples on the dance-floor . . . waiting, like a trapped rat, for someone, anyone, to draw and start blazing!

SLOWLY HE UNFOLDED THE square of paper. He moved it back and forth as he focussed on the words printed there, mumbling each one under his breath: "Ketchem—you'll die tonight in the Holy Hell at 8:30." The note was unsigned.

Rod Ketchem swore explosively and

3—Action Stories—Spring

half-rose out of his chair. He lifted his voice in a rasping shout. "You! Barkeep! Who give you this note to give to me?"

The bartender of the Holy Hell looked nervously around. The saloon was almost empty. There were safer places to enjoy a drink than around Rod Ketchem; and, as usual, when the big, ugly-tempered man had come in, the wiser customers had

drifted elsewhere. Those that were left contemplated their drinks in cautious silence.

The bartender cleared his throat. "A Mex kid," he mumbled. "He just tol' me to give it to you, Rod. Didn't say who it was from."

Rod Ketchem let himself back onto his chair, slowly. His first reaction of amazed anger was simmering down to a cold, deadly fury. If this was a joke, it was a damned poor one . . . and the joker'd better buy a trunk. "Didn't say who sent it, eh?" he said harshly. "Sounds like you knew it wasn't signed, else why you tellin' me that? Maybe you read it, huh?"

The bartender wilted before Rod's wolfish stare and began to carefully swab the mahogany. Rod's cold eyes watched him a moment longer, then he tilted up his glass and drank slowly, feeling the raw burning of the liquor in his throat, the convulsive warmth as it reached his stomach. He threw his head back to shoo a fly that had been buzzing lazily overhead and saw that the clock over the bar indicated 8:00.

He'd been game for a gun many times before, but had always known who was bracing him . . . This was a new sensation for Rod and he didn't like it. There was no need to check the notch-handled .44 that rested in its cutaway holster at his side. After years of living by it, a man took care of that before his thirst. He ran his glance quickly over the silent men at the card table and those new arrivals at the bar.

THIS HOLY HELL was beginning to come to life now and each man who passed through the batwings was pinned a moment under Rod's suspicious stare. He poured another drink and shuddered as it exploded in his stomach. "Any of these hombres might be him," he thought. "If I just knowed who it was!"

The five piece orchestra began a lively tune and the young, hard-faced hostesses circulated in among the customers. Rod read the note again and then his eyes moved to the clock. Eight fifteen. Hardly moving his shaggy head, he looked once more at every man in the saloon. Then he poured another drink, sloshing some over

the table top. He had it half way to his lips when the orchestra played an off-key fanfare.

The crowd quieted, and as Rod downed the drink he saw, over the rim of his glass, the lovely Latin dancing-girl carmalita, poised at the top of the stairs. Her dark eyes roved the up-turned faces below, then suddenly, to Rod's amazement, alighted on his and clung there. The big man's breath whooshed out and he sat a little straighter.

Smiling, Carmalita moved gracefully down the stairs, and that sultry, provocative gaze was still on Rod when she reached the dance floor. Then she tossed her head and winked at him, deliberately.

Rod watched stupefied as she came to the center of the floor and began to dance to the soft, drug-like rhythm of a tango. Her supple, golden-brown body drifted with maddening grace across the room.

Rod's whiskey-dulled eyes became olive with desire as they clung to every movement and soft contour of her form. He leaned over the table, all other thoughts brushed from his mind, as she came closer. Suddenly he scraped his chair back and began unsteadily to get up, but he paused when he heard her whisper, "Not now, mi amigo; after a while . . ."

Then, Carmalita smiled at him, fully and knowingly. As she moved away, Rod smiled too and reached clumsily for the bottle, gulping down the remaining two fingers of whisky. Some of it leaked from the corners of his mouth and dribbled over his stubbled chin. He hopped around in his chair to reach for his bandanna . . . and saw the tall man at the bar.

THIS ONE seemed different from the rest. The way he stood. The low-slung, tied-down .45 at his side. Rod watched as the man stared boldly at Carmalita, first with admiration and then with a surprised narrowing of his eyes. She brushed by him so closely that her whirling skirts brushed his dusty riding pants.

Rod's eyes sought the clock over the bar. It was eight thirty. "Maybe that's him—" The big man thought. "Maybe that's the bucko who's gunnin' fer Rod Ketchem!" Crumpling the brown paper

note in his big fist, he waited, his cold gaze on the tall man. He heard sudden applause and yelling and glanced swiftly at Carmalita. She had finished her dance and was bowing and smiling at the crowd.

Then, crossing the dance floor, Carmalita made for the stairs leading to her dressing room. Rod saw the tall man walk fast through the crowd and overtake her.

He was speaking hurriedly and softly. They reached the foot of the staircase and she finally turned to face him. Her eyes darted over his shoulder and met Rod's in a plea for protection.

The table went crashing as Rod lurched to his feet. Carmalita's companion turned swiftly around.

Rod was walking heavily toward him. The .44 seemed to jump into his hand. He put a slug into the tall man's shoulder. The man flinched, but he too had his gun out. He crouched low, fanning the hammer. Ketchem grabbed at his stomach with his left hand and began to teeter crazily on his feet. An agonized reflection of pain and confusion contorted his face. A second bullet chewed into his thick chest, and he doubled over and crashed to the floor. The clock over the bar hadn't ticked a dozen times.

Rod could faintly hear Carmalita laughing and, through pain-clouded eyes, he

could see the tall man standing over him, blood creeping and blotting on his shirt sleeve.

Rod managed to say, "Who are you—how come you wanted me?"

The tall man shook his head. "You must be loco, mister," he said flatly. "I never laid eyes on you before now, when you pulled down on me and started blazin'."

He holstered his gun and turned away. Rod struggled to penetrate the hazy film that was blacking out his sight. He could hear Carmalita laughing softly. "So it worked, big man!" she was saying, her voice cruel and toneless. "You're dying! I've dreamed and prayed for the time I could see you like this, Ketchem! In your own blood—dying!" She paused, her lips curling over the word. "Can you hear me, big man? Two years since you shot my kid brother down for bumping against you on the sidewalk. I vowed on my mother's life, I'd get you for that! *I sent you the note*—and then played to your filthy, drunken pride! It was easy, Rod Ketchem, playing one man, any tough stranger, against the like of you!"

She paused, staring at the figure at her feet, then said wearily, "No use talking . . . he can't hear. Bring a shutter, somebody, and set me up a stiff drink." She smiled a little at the silent crowd. "I just killed a man . . ."

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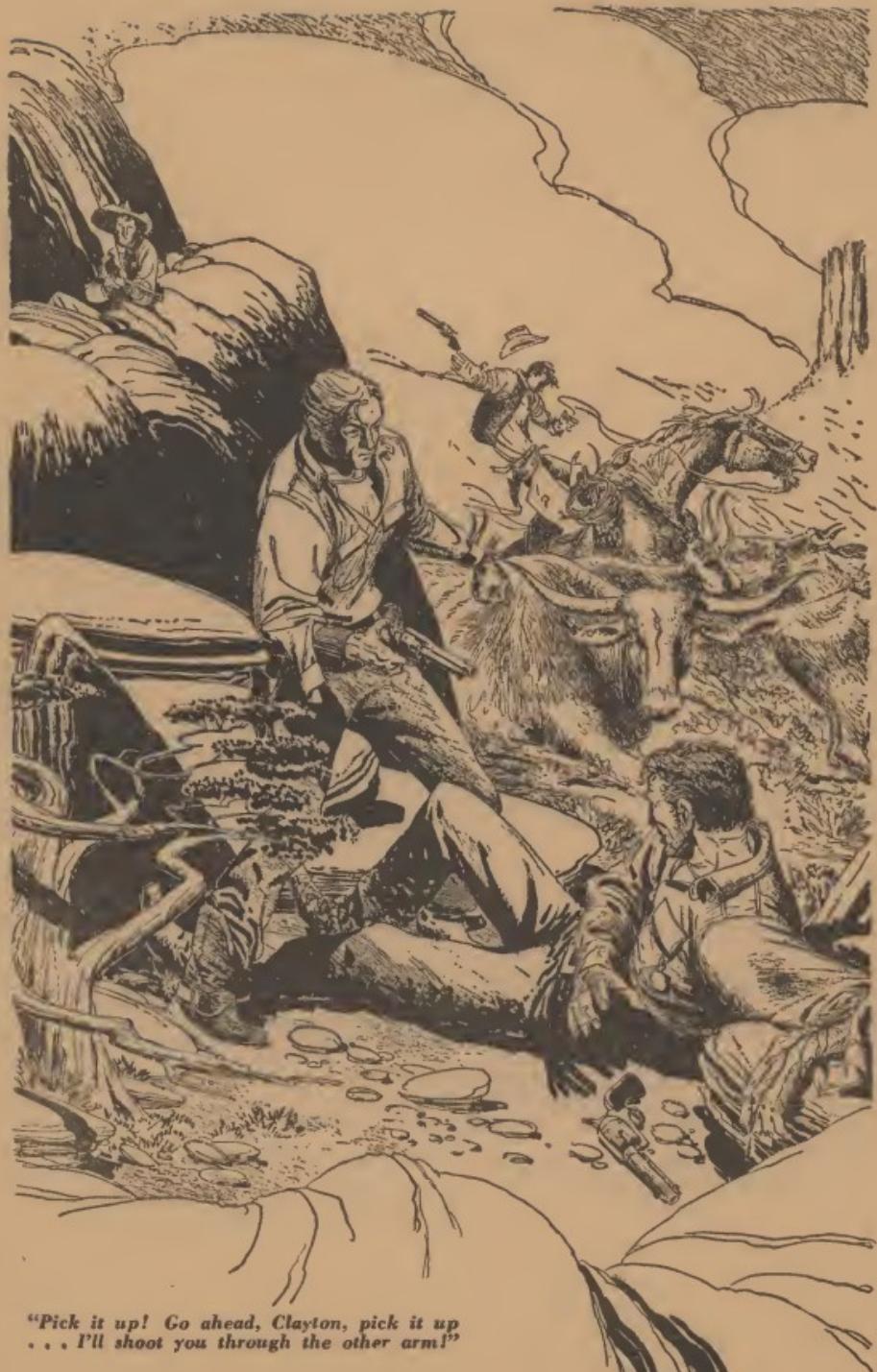
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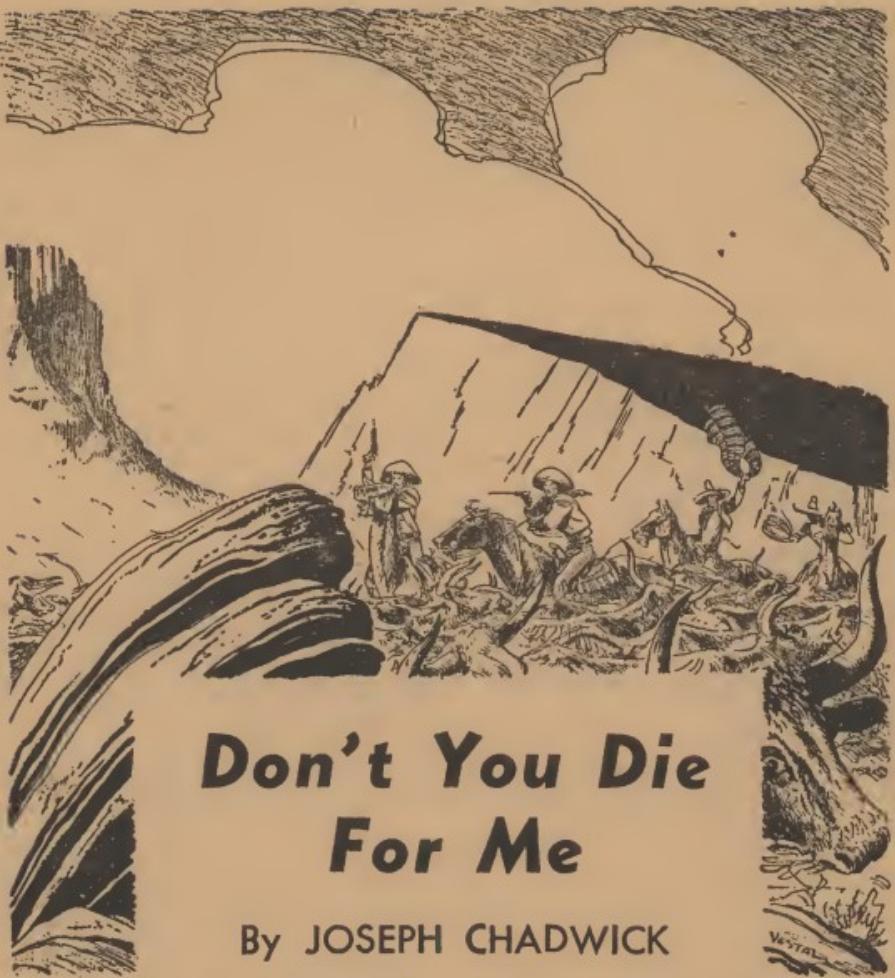
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*"Pick it up! Go ahead, Clayton, pick it up
... I'll shoot you through the other arm!"*



Don't You Die For Me

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

He'd bought a rag-down, hard-luck spread, just this side of Hell. He had troubles of his own. If a hard-case crew moved in on Evelyn Keyhoe's neighboring outfit, it just wasn't any of his business. So why in the devil, John Sands asked himself, was he going for his gun?

THEY CAME TO THE LAZY A at mid-day, John Sands riding beside the wagon driven by the Mexican called Diego. "You sure," Sands said, reining in, "this is the place?"

He knew the answer before Diego murmured, "*Si, Señor.*" The Mexican wouldn't have made a mistake. He'd worked here, for old Hank Allen, the previous owner.

Sands pushed his hat back off his brow, leaned forward on the saddle horn, looked about with bitter eyes. He'd been taken.

He'd exchanged good money for a hard-scrabble range, a few hundred head of snaky longhorned cattle, and a goat's nest of a ranch headquarters.

And he had nobody to blame but himself.

Only a fool would buy a ranch—and a border ranch, at that—sight unseen, as he'd bought the Lazy A. There wasn't much consolation in reminding himself that it had been dirt cheap. He'd had this dream of his, the dream of nine men out of ten, of owning his own outfit, of being his own

boss, and now he was waking up to reality.

"Well, let's get settled," he said—meaning, *Let's make the best of a bad bargain.*

The plank barn was ramshackle, with a roof that needed patching, and the pole corral, its gate down, sagged badly and leaned crazily. The ranchhouse was a 'dobe hut with a *viga* roof, its walls crumbling in spots, and here and there showing wide cracks. A pane was broken out of the front window, and the door, standing ajar, hung by one hinge only.

John Sands would have sworn that the place had been unoccupied for years had he not known that Hank Allen had lived there up until three months ago. He had no feeling of having at last found a home, and it was with reluctance that he dismounted.

He stepped from the bright sunlight into the gloom of the house. There was a gritty accumulation of sand and dust. All four corners were littered with junk—discarded gear and clothing, empty whiskey bottles, tin-cans. The fireplace, where the cooking was done, was a mess. There were two untidy bunks, a plank table with dirty dishes upon it, a couple of benches. A lantern hung from the ceiling. A goat's nest, all right—a pig sty.

Diego came in carrying a sack of flour.

He was a squat-bodied man of about forty-five, sleepy-eyed and lazy looking. He wore a big straw sombrero and a pair of badly worn boots, a faded and dirty blue shirt and a pair of jeans that needed a couple patches. He claimed to be a top-hand *vaquero*. Doubting that, Sands had hired him only because he knew the Lazy A. Diego had a heavy black mustache and a week's stubble of beard. He dumped the sack of flour onto the table, raising dust. He grinned, and said, "Ees good to come home, eh, boss?"

"Yeah. If you call this home."

"You don't like it?"

"Maybe," said Sands, "after it's cleaned up."

Diego went out, shaking his head, evidently puzzled that the new owner should find anything wrong with the Lazy A. He came in with a sack of *frijoles*, moving faster than ordinarily, excitement replacing his lazy look.

"Boss, some riders come!"

"Yeah?"

"Skull riders, boss!"

SANDS stared at him, saw that Diego's excitement was as much fear as anything else. He stepped to the doorway and saw a bunch of riders—five of them—coming in from the low rock hills a couple miles to the east. They were traveling at a lope, and it didn't take them long to reach the Lazy A headquarters. They were mounted on good horses, and they were a capable looking bunch. Sands stepped down from the doorway as they reined in, and Diego, following, kept behind him. Sands could hear the *vaquero* breathing hard.

"Sands?"

Sands eyed the speaker, a big man with an aggressive look and a demanding voice. Nodding, Sands admitted his name. The big man's horse, a white-faced sorrel, was skittish and, prancing nervously, swung sideways toward Sands. He noticed its brand. It was a queer shaped head. Like a *keyhole*, Sands thought. Or, if a man had imagination, like the outline of a skull viewed from the front.

Sands shifted his gaze back to the rider who, using a rough hand to steady the sorrel, said flatly, "We're from the Keyhole outfit. I'm Russ Clayton, Keyhole's ranch boss. I heard about you from Lawyer Milt Ferguson at San Marco."

"So?"

"So Mr. Ferguson thought I'd better drop around and have a talk with you," Clayton said. His tone remained flat; his words were clipped, blunt. "You should have a talk with him, Sands."

"Why?"

"He'll put you straight about some things."

"I'll have a talk with him, next time I get to San Marco."

"Make it tonight," said Russ Clayton.

It was a direct order, and Clayton seemed to have no idea that it wouldn't be obeyed. He looked beyond Sands, at Diego, and growled, "You, Mex. Ride over to Keyhole, if you want a job. Otherwise, just keep riding. This range ain't healthy for you. Savvy?"

Diego said, "*Si Señor,*" with relief in his

voice. He moved away from behind Sands, well off to one side. Giving him a glance, Sands saw that the Mexican had been scared and was relieved to find that these men he called Skull riders—because of the brand on their horses—were merely ordering him to clear off the Lazy A.

Sands looked back at Russ Clayton and the four men behind him, a stiff look of anger on his lean face. He didn't know what this was all about, but he didn't like any part of it. He stepped over closer to Clayton, frowned up at him. The Keyhole foreman needed a shave. His heavy face was bristly with reddish whiskers. Clayton was tough, without a trace of the humor that made a man human. Sands felt a quick, intense dislike.

"You're too damn' highhanded, Clayton," he said. "I hired Diego, and he stays hired. As for you're telling me to make a trip to town for a talk with some lawyer—"

Clayton broke in, "Maybe you have to be shown, hombre?"

He loosened the sorrel's reins, and the animal started its nervous prancing again. Sands took a backward step to avoid having the sorrel bump him. It swung sideways to him. Clayton gave no warning. He freed his right leg from the stirrup, and kicked out. The toe of his boot caught Sands under the chin, and Sands felt an explosion of pain. His reaction was mechanical. He flung up his hands, grabbed Clayton's foot. Rage gripped him. He gave the man's foot a violent twist, and wrenched a howl of pain from him. Then, still holding on, he shoved savagely upward—pushing Clayton from the saddle.

It all happened in the space of a heartbeat.

The other Keyhole riders had no time to take part in it.

But now Clayton, having landed in a sprawling heap with the breath knocked out of him, gasped, "Get him! Dammit; get that tricky son!"

SANDS was ducking around the sorrel to get at Clayton. He halted, reaching for his gun. Two of Clayton's men rode at him, however, and one slammed a gun-barrel down upon his head.

Sands' hat partly cushioned the blow,

but still his skull felt split open. His knees buckled, and he went down. Everything was reeling crazily before his eyes. His stomach seemed to be turning over and over. He tried to get up, made it to his hands and knees. He heard Russ Clayton mutter, "Let me have him!" The man's voice wasn't toneless now. It was wickedly eager. Rough hands grabbed Sands, heaved him erect. He stood swaying. He saw Russ Clayton's face, grinning in ugly fashion. He saw Clayton's fist come at him.

Sands tried to duck, and didn't make it.

Clayton's fist slammed into him. He was thrown back against the 'dobe. He slumped against the wall, trying to ward off Clayton's blows and to strike back. But the gunblow had robbed him of his strength, and the burly Keyhole ramrod kept pounding him at will. Clayton tried for no knock-out. He was merely giving Sands as much punishment as he could take without losing consciousness. Finally Sands slumped to the ground, dazed and in agony.

"Tough," Clayton growled, stepping back. His breathing was labored. "But not tough enough. Sands, you ride to town and see Ferguson. You hear?"

"I—I hear you," Sands gasped. "I'll see Ferguson."

He was on his hands and knees, his head hanging and blood dripping from his nose. He heard Russ Clayton mount and ride off with his men, and then, for a long time, he heard nothing but a roaring in his head. He rose finally, and stumbled to the well. He drew a pail of water, doused his head. When his vision cleared, the Keyhole riders had disappeared. But he saw a moving speck far-off. It was Diego, hoofing it toward the rock hills to the east—beyond which must lay Keyhole.

Sands came erect.

He shook his clenched fist in the direction of Keyhole.

He'd ride to San Marco and see Ferguson, all right. The lawyer would do to start with, when the time came to pay back that beating.

SANDS rode toward San Marco after carrying the rest of the provisions into the house and unhitching the wagon team.

He traveled without haste, and it was growing dark when he reached the town. It was little different from a hundred other southern Arizona towns. The older buildings were adobe, the newer were plank. A large portion of the population was Mexican. Sands knew it well enough, having stopped there overnight on his way to the Lazy A from Tucson, and having bought the wagon, team and provisions there, but he had to look for Milt Ferguson's office.

It was on the second floor of the building housing the San Marco Bank. There was a sign over the entrance at the corner of the building. The lighted windows evidently meant that the lawyer was in.

Sands left his horse at the bank's hitch-rack.

The entrance was dark, the stairway narrow. Boards creaked noisily under his weight. Arriving at the door above, he knocked so heavily it rattled in its frame. Anger still gripped him. The sore spots on his face and body would keep his anger fed a long time. A voice said, "Come in, come in."

Sands opened the door, stepped into a well-furnished office. A bulky man of about fifty was writing a letter at a rolltop desk, his bald head shiny in the lamplight. He lay aside his pen, looked up. His face was florid, flabby. He half rose, offering his hand.

"Sands?" he asked. "John Sands?"

Sands knocked the hand aside, shoved the fat man back into his chair.

"Talk," he ordered. "I'm listening."

"Really, sir—"

"Don't play dumb, Ferguson. You know I didn't come here to shake your hand. You sent a bunch of tough riders to give me a message. And to beat me up so I'd know you weren't fooling."

It wasn't warm in the room, but Ferguson began to sweat. He pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket, mopped at his face. His eyes were like glass beads—black and shiny. They were scared.

Sands waited, feet planted before the other's chair. Ferguson fiddled with some papers.

"Believe me, Sands," he said thickly. "If violence was used—"

"If?" Sands broke in. "Hell, man; look at my face!"

FERGUSON looked. He saw cuts and bruises, a swollen nose, an eye turning black. He shuddered. "I had no part in it, Sands," he said. "I give you my word."

"You sent those riders, didn't you?"

"No, sir. I merely told Russ Clayton that the Lazy A had been taken over by a man named John Sands," Ferguson said. He was getting back his nerve. His voice was steadier. "Keyhole Ranch's owner is a client of mine, Sands. My most important client, actually. After it was learned that Hank Allen died while visiting Tucson, I was authorized to locate Hank's heirs, buy the ranch, and add it to the Keyhole holdings. I learned too late that there were no heirs, that the Drovers Bank at Tucson had taken over the property before Allen's death because of his failure to meet mortgage payments. The bank had already sold the property to you for the amount due on the mortgage."

"Well, sir, this morning I spoke to Clayton," Ferguson went on. "I told him to tell his employer—Keyhole's owner, my client—that I wouldn't let the matter drop. I said that I would see you on your next trip to town and make you an offer for the Lazy A."

"So Clayton took it on himself to tell me to see you right away," Sands said. "And he roughed me up so that I'd be glad to sell to you."

"He's hotheaded, I admit. He goes off half-cocked."

"All right. So Clayton's responsible—not you."

"Unless Keyhole's owner sent him to talk with you."

"That's an idea," Sands said. "Maybe I'd better settle this with Keyhole's owner. Maybe I can find out what makes the Lazy A so valuable to the Keyhole crowd." He eyed Ferguson narrowly. The fat man was no longer sweating, but there was an uneasy look in his beady eyes. "Maybe you know that, eh?"

Ferguson shrugged. "Keyhole merely wants to consolidate its holdings. Part of its range lies west of the Lazy A, while the larger part lies east. Your property cuts Keyhole in two, Sands."

"Thanks for the information. I can bargain on it."

"My client placed a top price on the Lazy A, I'm afraid."

"How much is it?"

"Twice what the ranch cost you."

"It cost me twenty-three hundred dollars," Sands said. "Selling at twice that figure would give me a nice profit."

Ferguson nodded his bald head. "You'd be well advised to accept it," he said. "Think it over. I'll have a talk with my client, if you wish, and try to get a round figure of five thousand dollars. The addition four hundred should pay you damages for what you suffered at Russ Clayton's hands. How much time will you take to decide?"

"Twenty-four hours," Sands said. "But forget the extra four hundred. I'll collect my own damages from Russ Clayton." He nodded, turned to the door. He paused, faced about. "What's the shortest way to Keyhole headquarters?"

"Just follow the south road from San Marco."

"Keyhole's owner is there?"

"Yes."

"What's the name?"

"E. V. Keyhoe," Milt Ferguson said. "The name suggested the brand of a key-hole." He forced a thin smile. "Some folks who don't like the outfit like to mistake the Keyhole brand for a Skull. Let me know what you decide, Sands."

"Yeah," said Sands, going out.

He was halfway down the steps when he wondered if he hadn't been sold a bill of goods, up there in Lawyer Milt Ferguson's office.

IT WAS EIGHT O'CLOCK when Sands finished supper at the hotel across from the bank building. He mounted his gray gelding and headed south from San Marco. He kept to the road, altering the gray's stride between a lope and a walk, and it was a lot of miles to the Keyhole. But finally he came to a barbed wire fence, its gate crossing the road. There was a big plank sign fastened to the gate, and a half moon gave light enough for Sands to read the legend burnt into the wood with a running-iron.

The sign read: No trespassing!—KEYHOLE RANCH—Keep Out!

"Neighborly as all get-out," Sands muttered, and spat in contempt.

He opened the gate, rode through, and it, rigged with pulleys and weights, swung closed behind him. He again kept to the road, and it was another hour and more miles before he saw lighted windows ahead. Sands had traveled all this way on his anger, and only now, within sight of Keyhole headquarters, did a measure of caution come to him. He realized that he was riding straight into the hands of the tough Keyhole crew, that it might mean another beating for him, and he wondered abruptly, *Why'd I come here?* He wanted revenge, of course. A man who has been hurt at another's hands, in an unfair fight, always wanted revenge. But he didn't get it by giving his enemy a chance to make another unfair fight of it.

Still, Sands was there. And he wasn't turning back.

He drew his saddle gun from its scabbard, and rode on toward Keyhole's lights.

The bunkhouse, a big adobe, was to the right. Beside it was the cookshack and mess hall, a plank building. The bunkhouse windows showed lamplight; its door was open, and a man—a silhouetted shape—lounged there. The barns and other buildings and corrals were beyond. The ranch house was to the left, close to a clump of cottonwood trees. It was a rambling one-storied adobe with a roofed veranda all along the front. Sands swung to the left. The saddle gun was cocked, across his thighs.

"You there, stranger," the man in the bunkhouse doorway called. "Where'd you think you're going?"

"To see E. V. Keyhoe," Sands called back. "If it's any of your business."

The man ducked back into the bunkhouse.

Sands kept on going. He dismounted by the house, then heard a harsh voice demand, "You, hombre! Stand where you are!" It was Russ Clayton's voice. He was coming from the bunkhouse, a couple men following him. Either he had inordinately good eyes or he made a guess, for he said, "Sands? That you, Sands?"

Sands swung his rifle up. He fired three shots over the heads of the three Keyhole men—warning shots, but still close enough

to make two of the men fall back and to force a startled yell from Clayton. He darted across the veranda toward the door. It swung open as he reached it, and a woman stared at him. Sands felt a measure of relief. Those warning shots wouldn't hold the Keyhole crew for long. But the presence of this woman—a young and attractive woman—would certainly keep Clayton and his men from opening fire on him.

"Sorry to have frightened you, ma'am," Sands said quickly. "But I want to see Keyhole's owner, E. V. Keyhoe, before Clayton and his crew jump me again. I'm John Sands, new owner of the Lazy A." Footsteps pounded across the ranchyard. Sands stepped past the woman, into the hallway beyond. The woman stepped aside as he closed the door, still staring at him in a wide-eyed way. "You're Mrs. Keyhoe?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm Mrs. Keyhoe."

"Your husband's here?"

"My husband is—is dead."

Sands was staggered, mentally. "You—?" he asked.

"I'm E. V. Keyhoe," the woman said.

The heavy footsteps pounded on the veranda. A hurtling body hit the door with such terrific force that it slammed it wide open. Russ Clayton leapt in, wild-eyed, ugly with rage. There was a sixgun in his hand. He called Sands an obscene name and swung the gun up. This time Sands was ready for him. He had a two handed grip on his rifle, and he swung it like a club.

CLAYTON had left his hat in the bunkhouse, his reddish-brown hair was cut short. There was nothing to cushion the blow. John Sands wasn't thinking of revenge when he clubbed the man; he was simply reacting to the very real threat of being gut-shot. He felt the jolt of the blow clear through to his shoulders, heard the sickening thud, saw Clayton's eyes turn glassy and his mouth sag open. The Keyhole foreman went down loosely, flat on his face.

Behind Sands, Mrs. Keyhoe cried out in horror.

The two men who had followed Clayton from the bunkhouse came in warily, guns

drawn. The sight of their boss sprawled there and of Sands covering them with his Winchester took the fight out of them. They'd been to the Lazy A with Clayton during the day. They were tough looking, but Sands recognized their toughness as being an uncertain thing when the odds were not with them.

"Drop 'em," he ordered. "Come on, drop those guns."

They obeyed sullenly, one muttering, "You think you can get away with this, mister?"

That was something to think about.

Sands thought about it. Russ Clayton was unconscious, these two were disarmed. But there were plenty more men, plenty more guns, over in the bunkhouse. They'd get him when he tried to leave. It wasn't pleasant to consider.

Sands considered a little more. He said, "Clayton'll help me get away with it. He stays here. He goes with me when I leave. If anybody tries to jump me, I'll shoot Clayton. That clear enough?"

It was clear enough.

The two Keyhole hands nodded, both of them scowling.

Sands breathed easier. He could work it like that, use Clayton as a hostage, and there wouldn't be any trouble. He nodded at the taller of the pair, a swarthy faced man. "You," he said. "Fetch my rope off my horse."

The man started to tell him where to go, but he changed his mind upon looking into Sand's chill eyes. He saw a man who meant to stay alive no matter what the cost. He went out, came back with the rope, pitched it to the floor.

"Thanks. Now you two get back to the bunkhouse—and stay there," Sands told them. "And remember, Clayton stays alive only as long as nobody bothers me."

He closed the door when they backed out.

He leaned the rifle against the wall, picked up the rope. He hogtied Russ Clayton. The man groaned and began to stir as Sands tied the last knot. Coming erect, reaching for his rifle, Sands looked at the woman. She was pale, but the frightened look was gone from her eyes. She was watching him with, it seemed to Sands,

something like fascination. He expected her to tongue-lash him. He waited, but no furious outbursts came. But when she spoke, in a low voice husky with feeling, he was jolted harder than if she'd shown anger.

"I've been waiting for you," she said, "a long, long time."

JOHN SANDS didn't know whether to doubt his own sanity or that of the people connected with Keyhole. He stared at the woman, and she smiled back. "That is a silly thing to say, isn't it?" she said. "When I couldn't have been waiting for you, since I didn't know you existed."

"It takes some explaining."

"Yes. All of this does," Mrs. Keyhoe said, her smile gone. "Let's go into the office, so that he—" she glanced at Russ Clayton who was coming around—"won't overhear."

Sands followed her to a room to the left of the hall.

When she lighted the hanging lamp, he saw that the room was an unusual ranch office. It was comfortably furnished; there were armchairs and a sofa as well as a desk, and the floor was carpeted. There was a bookcase, its shelves filled. It suggested a person of good taste, and the money to indulge himself. Mrs. Keyhoe saw Sands looking about, and said, "I furnished it for my husband. He spent a lot of time here. Sam liked to read late at night."

Her voice was unsteady, saying that.

Sands looked at her, saw her now for the woman she was. She was perhaps thirty years old. She was tall and nicely formed, in a becoming dress of dark green. Her hair was auburn, her eyes a gold-flecked brown. She was, to Sands' eyes, an attractive woman.

"My husband has been dead two years now," she went on. "He was killed late one night as he rode for home after a poker game in the Trail Saloon at San Marco. Usually Sam had poor luck at cards, but that night he was a heavy winner. Whoever killed him, robbed his body. But I—I don't believe robbery was the real motive."

This was no concern of his, so far as Sands could see, but he was interested.

"How much did he win in that poker game?"

"More than two thousand dollars."

"Men have been murdered for less."

Mrs. Keyhoe nodded. "I'm sure of that," she said, "But I believe—I'll always believe it!—that my husband was murdered because somebody wanted Keyhole Ranch. Shortly before his death, Sam had turned down an offer to sell Keyhole. Shortly afterward I was asked to sell. I think that the man who wants the ranch believed it would be easier to deal with a widow. . . . But I refused to sell. I know little about ranching, Mr. Sands, but I'm determined. I have to be. You see, I have a four-year-old son. I must hold Keyhole for him."

Sands nodded. "Go on," he invited.

Mrs. Keyhoe was frowning now. There was a troubled look in her eyes. "Things haven't been going well. Cattle prices are low. Rustlers are raiding Keyhole. I've been forced to withdraw heavily from my bank account, and soon I shall have to borrow money. I have no proof but I suspect that I am a victim of a plot—a plot to bankrupt me."

"So that you lose Keyhole?"

"Yes."

"Who wanted to buy Keyhole after your husband's death?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. The San Marco Bank acted as the person's agent. Will Langley, who owns the bank, merely said that this person wanted to remain anonymous."

Sands was thoughtful for a moment. He'd come here to find out why the Keyhole crew had tried to scare him into selling the Lazy A, but he was merely learning about someone else's trouble. He said, "That poker game. Who sat in on it with your husband?"

THE woman's eyes narrowed down, her voice took on bitterness. She said, "There were five besides Sam. Will Langley, the banker; Milton Ferguson, the lawyer; Russ Clayton; Hank Allen; and Cleve Worden, who owns the Mercantile general store at San Marco."

Sands understood what lay behind her bitterness as she named those poker players. "You suspect one of them?"

"One or more of them."

"All of them, maybe?"

"Well, yes . . ." she said. "They are polite to me. They keep saying that Sam was their friend, that they want to help me and my son. But sometimes I see them smiling, when they think I'm not watching. And somehow I feel as though I'm being kept a prisoner on my own ranch. Russ Clayton never lets me go to town alone. He and his men won't let me have visitors. Even my friends are kept away from Keyhole."

"How come Clayton is Keyhole's ranch boss?"

"Mr. Langley suggested that I hire him, after Sam's death. Russ is a good cowman, but . . . Well, he got rid of the Mexican *vaqueros* my husband employed, and brought in some tough friends of his."

"Hank Allen died on a trip to Tucson," Sands said. "I bought his Lazy A. I'd hardly gotten there when Clayton and some of his crew showed up and told me that I should see Lawyer Ferguson. They gave me a beating, so that I would see him. Ferguson told me that you wanted to buy the Lazy A."

"Clayton urged me to buy it, Mr. Sands."

Ferguson was mealy-mouthed. He said that Keyhole's owner was named E. V. Keyhoe, but didn't mention that E. V. Keyhoe was a woman. He wanted me to come out here—so Clayton and his crew could take care of me."

"I sign my name that way, Mr. Sands. My name is Evelyn Virginia. . . ."

"Why did Clayton want you to buy the Lazy A?"

"To join Keyhole's west range with the larger east range, he said."

Sands nodded jerkily. "It was for more reason than that," he told Evelyn Keyhoe. "With Hank Allen—who was one of the bunch—dead, Clayton and the others were afraid to have a stranger settled on the Lazy A. They knew you'd welcome it. That's why you said that you'd been waiting for me a long, long time. You thought I might side you. Right?"

Evelyn nodded. "When I saw how you handled Clayton and the other two, I believed that you were the answer to my prayers. You may laugh, Mr. Sands, but for two years now I've prayed that a man

like my dead husband might be sent to me."

"I'm not laughing. This thing's not funny."

"Do you think—?"

Sands looked her straight in the eyes. "I could side you—and get myself killed," he told her brusquely. "This thing is bigger than I'd guessed. I figured that only the two-bit Lazy A was at stake. But it's the Keyhole, and it must be worth a lot of trouble—to somebody. It'd be smart of me to sell out to Milt Ferguson."

Evelyn wilted. There'd been hope in her eyes. It faded away.

"I understand," she said. "It might mean your life. They won't stoop to murdering a woman. But if a man sided me. . . ."

Her voice trailed away. She listened intently, and now Sands heard a sleepy child's voice calling, "Mommie—Mommie!" Evelyn called back, "Yes, Danny! I'm coming!"

The boy appeared in the doorway before she reached it. He was very small, tow-headed, sleepy. He was in a nightshirt, barefooted. "Something scared me, Mommie," Danny whimpered. His mother gathered him up in her arms. She looked at Sands. "Now do you see why I hoped that you had been sent to help me?"

SANDS FROWNED. He tried to harden his heart. But it was no good. He watched Evelyn Keyhoe carry her son to the sofa and sit there cuddling him to her, her hand stroking the boy's tousled hair. Four-year-old Danny couldn't know of the fears that beset his mother, yet he had wakened in the night—afraid. He would know fear, as he grew older. It was an ugly game, this making war on a widow and a fatherless boy. Suddenly John Sands wanted to help.

And he knew that he was a fool.

He turned his back to the mother and child. He rolled and lighted a cigarette. He knew that he should get away from this house, away from Keyhole, away from this country. He should take Russ Clayton with him, as far as he needed a hostage, then ride—and keep on riding. Yet he didn't go. Something held him.

After a time, Evelyn said softly, "Mr. Sands . . ."

He turned. She stood now. The boy was asleep on the sofa.

"Mr. Sands, I wouldn't ask just any man," she said huskily. "I know that an ordinary man couldn't help me. But I have a feeling about you. You're strong. You've got courage. You're much the man Sam Keyhoe was."

"And he's dead."

"He was shot in the back."

"My back would make an easy target, too."

"No. You'd be on guard. Sam didn't know he had enemies."

Sands' face was rocky, but she had him feeling soft inside. He said flatly, "You're asking me to die for you."

Evelyn said, "No, no!" in a thick whisper. She came to him, caught hold of his arm, and on her face was a look of sudden excitement. "Say that I want you to live, John! Do you mind if I call you that? Really live, John! Not on a heartbreak spread like the Lazy A, but on the Keyhole—as a part of it! Help me, keep Keyhole for me, and I'll share it with you. We'll be partners, you and I, John Sands!"

Startled, he tried to picture that. He, John Sands, a man who had worked as a forty-a-month cowhand, as a bronc-buster, as a mustanger, as a muleskinner, as a mucker in the mines at Tombstone. . . . becoming half owner of an outfit like Keyhole! It was bait for the trap, and damn' attractive bait. And there was the woman herself, her hand gripping his arm, her eyes pleading with him. Maybe she was offering herself as well—to him, a man whose life was one lonely night after another.

He put his cigarette on an ashtray upon the desk, and caught her roughly by the shoulders. He was hurting her, bruising her, but she did not protest. "How do I know you'll keep your part of the bargain?"

"I'll put it in writing. A partnership agreement, John."

"Never mind. If I stay alive, I'll collect what's due me."

"And you'll have no trouble collecting," Evelyn promised. Her face was aglow, and so her husband must have made her look

on occasion. "You'll take Russ Clayton away?"

"That's the first step," Sands said, nodding.

"And then the—the others?"

He stared at her, a murky suspicion crossing his mind. "A part of this is revenge," he said, not liking the thought. "You blame five men for your husband's death. Hank Allen is gone. But you want revenge on the other four. You've got me wrong. I'm no killer. If I can break up this crazy business without gunplay, that's how I'll do it. But I'm not packing a vengeance gun for you—or for anybody!"

She nodded. "Do it your way, John," she said. "But save Keyhole!"

A DOZEN ARMED MEN lurked in the shadows about the buildings of Keyhole headquarters as Sands followed Russ Clayton from the house. Clayton's legs were wobbly, and he staggered like a drunk. He was still feeling that blow on the head. His hands were bound together in front of him. Sands kept close behind him, rifle ready, and they stepped down from the veranda. Sands' horse was still waiting. He'd expected Clayton's men to take it away.

Evelyn came to the edge of the veranda, against Sands' wishes. She believed that her presence would keep the watching men from opening fire on Sands. Maybe she was right. But Sands was counting more on Clayton's presence. The Keyhole crew wouldn't endanger their boss.

"Tell them to fetch you a mount," Sands ordered, jabbing Clayton in the back with the rifle. "Tell them no tricks."

Clayton cursed him in a dull voice, but did as he was told.

A shadowy figure moved away from the bunkhouse toward the corrals. It took the man some little while to rope and saddle a horse, and the waiting was hard on John Sands. His nerves were knotted up. He'd never been in a tighter spot. Finally the Keyhole hand came across the ranchyard with the saddled horse.

"That's far enough," Sands told him. "Now get back."

"Russ?" the man asked.

"Do as he says, Marty," Clayton mut-

tered. "He'll kill me sure, if you boys try anything. Just wait. There'll be another time."

Marty said, "Yeah. Yeah, boss," and backed away slowly.

Sands jabbed Clayton again. "Get on that horse," he ordered. "Ride out ahead of me. And keep remembering, it's your life that's at stake."

He waited until Clayton swung up, then he mounted his gray. This was another bad moment. He made an easy target now. He said, to Evelyn Keyhoe, "If I live, I'll be back. Count on it." He turned his horse after Clayton's, and the two of them rode slowly away from the ranch headquarters. Sands found himself riding with his back hunched up, braced for the slugs that would surely tear into it. But the shots didn't come. They rode on, and when Sands finally looked back the lights of Keyhole were no longer visible. He kept behind Clayton. It was darker now. The half moon was hidden by clouds.

"Who killed Sam Keyhoe?" Sands asked abruptly.

"Why ask me?" Clayton growled.

"You were in on that poker game. A rigged game. Mrs. Keyhoe says her husband usually lost at poker. The game must've been rigged that night, to let him win, so that when he was murdered it would look as though some thief killed him to rob him of his winnings. Three money men were in the game—Ferguson, Langley, and Warden. Town men. Men who live by their wits. They wouldn't be likely to bush up and backshoot a man."

"Smart, ain't you, Sands?"

"Then there were two ordinary men in the game. Hank Allen and you. The other three would put the dirty work onto your sort, Russ."

"Smart as they come, you!"

"Hank was old. He might have slipped up on a bushwacking."

"So that leaves me, eh?"

"Looks like it," Sands said. He wasn't sure that Clayton was the killer; this was just an attempt to bait the man. "I'd bet on it. I'd bet that one of those town hombres'll pin it on you, when I crowd them into a corner. You were plenty scared when Hank Allen cashed in his chips—

scared to have a stranger on the Lazy A. Scared a stranger would find out what's going on at the Keyhole."

CLAYTON twisted in the saddle, spat an oath back at Sands. "You've let a woman talk you into something, Sands—right into a grave!" he said savagely. "How far do you think you'll get? How far do you think my boys'll let you take me?"

"Far enough for you and I to have a talk with the law."

"The law!" Clayton sneered.

But he was impressed. He lapsed back into his sullen silence.

They came to the drift fence, passed through, letting the gate swing closed behind them. The road ahead curved around a jumble of rocks, huge boulders and slabs. It had been inky black, but suddenly the moon slipped from behind the clouds. And Sands saw a metallic gleam there among the rocks. He saw it a second time, moving slightly. It was the playing of moonlight upon a polished belt buckle or gun barrel.

He thought in alarm, *Ambush?*

It was possible.

Some of the Keyhole riders could have ridden out while their foreman was held prisoner in the ranchhouse. They could have anticipated Sands' taking Clayton away with him. And this was the logical spot for an ambush.

Sands kneed his horse and rode past Clayton, saying, "Keep behind me!" He wasn't sure that there were armed men hiding among the rocks, but he was not taking chances with this tough crowd. He reasoned that any such ambishers would open fire before making sure of the identity of the man in the lead. They would almost certainly believe that the prisoner, not the guard, would be riding ahead.

Clayton caught on.

He started to shout something, but too late.

A voice yelled, "Watch it, Russ! Turn aside!"

It was Sands who turned aside as the guns crashed.

It was Russ Clayton who screamed—and fell from his horse.

Sands kept on going, riding hard, the

ambush guns firing wild shots after him.

IT WAS well past midnight when Sands got back to San Marco. At that hour, the town was dark and quiet. Sands could count the few lights on the fingers of one hand. He stopped at the livery stable, woke the hostler, an old Mexican, and left his horse.

He walked along the main street. Milt Ferguson's office windows were dark. There was a dim light in the adobe building housing the town marshal's office and lock-up. The Trail Saloon, where Sam Keyhoe had sat in on his last poker game, was still open. A solitary saddle horse stood at the saloon's hitch-rack. Sands turned toward the swinging doors.

Sands had spent an hour in the Trail the previous night.

It was an ordinary cowtown drinking-place, a plain bar and a few tables. The mining towns did things in fancier style. The bartender, a baldheaded Irishman, remembered Sands and said, "Evening." He reached for a glass and a bottle of rye. A man was standing at the far end of the bar, a rider by his dress. He turned a lean face toward Sands, gave him a sharply curious look. Two townsmen sat at a corner table sharing a bottle, and they looked over at Sands with even more interest.

Sands put a coin on the bar, reached for his drink. "You know where Ferguson, the lawyer, lives?" he asked the bartender.

"He has a room at the hotel."

"Thanks."

He downed his drink, took out makings, started to roll a cigarette. The lank-faced rider down-bar kept giving him curious glances. It was too earnest an interest to be ignored, and Sands, lighting his cigarette, wondered, *Keyhole?* He lounged against the bar, watching the rider out of the corner of his eye. The man's curious glances grew more intent. The bartender yawned widely. He looked as though he wished the customers would clear out so that he could close for the night. Sands turned and looked at the rider. The man met his gaze. His eyes were a washed-out blue. There was a big question in them.

Sands was touchy from what he'd gone through since mid-day, and he said peev-

ishly. "That's right. My name's Sands. I took over the Lazy A today. I didn't notice the brand on your horse outside, but if it's a Keyhole—you're looking at the right man. Sands is my name."

"Take it easy, Mr. Sands. You're going off half-cocked," the rider said, in a drawl that was lazy and somehow mocking. "Your name means nothing to me. Neither does Keyhole."

"Maybe it's just my looks you're interested in?"

"Maybe. Your face is sure messed up."

"Well, ask—if you want to know how it got messed up."

The rider shrugged. "None of my business," he drawled. "I'm a stranger in these parts. Just passing through. Been wondering where I'll bunk tonight. Forget that I looked at you."

Somehow it rang as hollow as a counterfeit coin. The man wasn't much of a liar. It was his eyes that gave him away. He couldn't hide the interest in them, the curiosity about John Sands. One of the townsmen rose and left the table, coming across the room toward Sands. He was well dressed, prosperous looking, a man of about forty. He was short, stocky, dark. He had a neatly trimmed black mustache.

"I couldn't help overhearing, Mr. Sands," he said, offering his hand. "I'm Will Langley, president of the San Marco Bank. Most of the ranchers hereabouts deal at my bank, Mr. Sands. If I can ever be of service to you. . . ."

He smiled, with that friendliness of a banker or a businessman looking at a prospective customer.

Sands ignored the proffered hand. He glanced beyond Langley, at the townsmen still at the table. A flinty-eyed, hawk-nosed man with sparse brown hair and a sallow complexion. Sands had seen him in the Mercantile that morning when he bought his stock of provisions. The man had come in and barked orders at the clerk, and disappeared into the office at the rear of the store.

Sands said, "I've met Ferguson. You're Langley. That's Worden. I had a run-in with Russ Clayton. The only one I didn't get to know was Hank Allen."

Langley withdrew his hand, frowning.

"I don't understand, Sands."

Across the room, Cleve Worden looked worried.

Sands said, "I had a talk with Mrs. Keyhoe tonight."

Langley's eyes took on a veiled look. "A pitiful figure, Mrs. Keyhoe," he said. "She hasn't been herself since her husband's death. She must have told you about that poker game. Sam Keyhoe was murdered on his way home that night, with his winnings. The murderer was a sneak thief. He was never found."

SANDS saw no uneasiness in Langley's manner. He realized that he was talking to a man too tough mentally to be tricked into a dangerous admission. He was wasting his time talking to Will Langley, and nothing would be gained by bracing Cleve Worden while the banker was there to give him moral support. Milt Ferguson was the man to tackle. The lawyer feared violence. A roughing up might make him talk.

Sands said, "There are only three of you left, Langley. Hank Allen is gone. Russ Clayton got shot tonight. For your information, I'm not only staying on the Lazy A but I'm going to be Keyhole's ranch boss as well. I made a deal with Mrs. Keyhoe."

Langley frowned, then looked bland again. "I wish you success, Mr. Sands. Keyhole hasn't been prospering these past two years. Who killed Clayton?"

"A couple of his own men, trying to bushwhack me."

"You must be very lucky, Mr. Sands," Langley said, and turned away.

He went out, followed by Cleve Worden.

The bartender began putting out the light. The lank-faced rider came along the bar. He smiled. "Couldn't help overhearing, Mr. Sands," he said. "Seems as though your kind of ranch boss would pay good wages. Fighting wages. You hiring any hands?"

"Thought you were just passing through."

"I'm in no hurry."

"I'll think it over," Sands said, not liking the man's smile. "I'll tell you if I need you in the morning. You got a name?"

"Jim Hilton."

"See you in the morning, Hilton."

"In the meantime," Hilton said, "I sleep light."

He turned and walked out, leaving Sands puzzled by his last remark. Leaving the saloon, Sands saw the man leading his horse toward the livery stable. Sands turned toward the San Marco Hotel. There was nobody on duty at the desk in the lobby, and Sands ignored the night bell. He looked through the register. He had to turn back a number of pages to find the name Milton Ferguson. The lawyer had been living there several years. There was a room number inked in beside the name.

Sands climbed the stairs. A bracket lamp dimly lighted the upstairs hall. Sands found Ferguson's door, and knocked lightly. The lawyer was slow in calling, "What is it?"

"It's John Sands, Ferguson. I want to talk with you."

"All right. Wait a minute."

Sands heard the bed creak and shuffling footsteps. A key turned in the lock. Ferguson had not lighted the lamp. He was in his nightshirt and carpet slippers. "Come in," he said, backing up.

Sands stepped into the dark room.

Too late he sensed another presence besides Ferguson's. The ceiling seemed to drop upon his head. The floor seemed to come up and hit him.

SOMEBODY yelled like crazy, other voices jabbered, boots pounded. Sands heard it dimly, through the roaring in his head. Rough hands seized him, hauled him erect. Two men half carried, half dragged him out of Ferguson's room, along the hall, down the stairs, through the lobby. The jabbering voices faded away. Sands clung to consciousness by a slender thread. His mind cleared somewhat as he was hustled across San Marco's main street. But everything was still hazy when he was shoved into a cell in the lock-up.

He sprawled on the floor.

He let himself go, physically and mentally, and fell into a restless sleep. A border-line sleep. He kept coming half awake. He was like a sick person who was denied real sleep which eased pain. Sands' head throbbed. His stomach churned. He'd ab-

sorbed too much punishment in too short a time. The beating Russ Clayton had given him had been bad enough. That gun-blow to the head had just about done for him. He woke again.

Somebody was shaking him, saying, "Come on, Sands. Wake up."

There were two of them. They'd come into the cell. One was holding a lamp. He was a tall, gaunt man with a shaggy gray mustache. He wore a badge that had "Marshal" stamped into it. The other man, bending over Sands, was the lank-faced rider who called himself Jim Hilton.

"Listen, Sands," Hilton said. "You hear me? You understand?"

"Yeah," Sands said. He managed to sit up. He held his head in his hands. "Yeah. I understand."

"You went to Ferguson's room and threatened him with a gun," Hilton told him. "Will Langley, the banker, has the room across the hall. He heard it. He stepped over—the door was open—and dropped you with a blow to the head."

"Langley was in the room. I didn't threaten anybody."

"I'm just telling you what they claim, Sands."

"All right."

"They wanted you locked up. See?" Hilton went on. "They told Marshal Newlin here that Ferguson would bring charges against you. They also wanted you held for Russ Clayton's murder. You admitted that Clayton got shot tonight, and they want to pin this murder on you."

"Clayton was killed by his own men, if he's dead," Sands muttered.

"That'll take some proving," said Hilton. "Anyway, his death hasn't been reported. Maybe he's still alive, and just shot up. Can you travel?"

Sands looked up, surprised. "Travel?" he said. "Well... Sure."

"Good. We're getting out of here," Hilton told him. "I'll get horses. Newlin will give you a cup of coffee. Maybe that'll bring you around until I get back. But I won't be long."

Sands was still sipping the hot, black coffee Marshal Newlin had poured for him, from a pot kept on the little stove in the

corner of his office. Sands finished it in a hurry, put the cup down on Newlin's desk. The marshal had given him his gun and his hat. Newlin looked troubled.

"Make a good show of it, Hilton," he said. "I'll make a racket, and then tell the town that a stranger threw down on me and freed Sands. I've got to protect myself. This town pays my salary, such as it is."

Hilton nodded, said, "Thanks, Marshal. You've been a help."

He flung the door open, said, "Out with you, Sands."

SANDS went out at a stumbling run. Two horses stood in the street, one a big dun rigged with a saddle Sands recognized as his own. He swung up. The effort made his head pound with pain. Hilton mounted the other horse. They swung away, headed along the dark street at a gallop. Behind them Marshal Newlin made his racket. He yelled and fired off his gun, shattering the night quiet—waking the whole town.

Sands and his companion left San Marco behind, taking the south road. They pounded along for a couple of miles, then slowed to a walk. "Safe enough, for the time being," Hilton muttered. "It'll take Newlin some time to form a posse. Then he'll lead it in the wrong direction."

"Look; just who are you?" Sands demanded.

"Border Patrol."

"You! I figured that you were a saddle bum!"

Hilton nodded. "The last man sent to this part of the border by the patrol disappeared. The one before him turned up dead, shot through the back. It's not healthy to wear the uniform around here. Like it's not healthy for a hombre named John Sands to buy a ranch called the Lazy A." He grinned at Sands. They were still heading south as they talked. "Beginning to catch on?"

"I'm still groggy from being hit on the head," Sands replied.

"Hank Allen crossed up his crowd by dying," Hilton explained. "The old man was in on the game—not a full partner, but still one of the crowd. He always pretended

to be feeble-minded—in his dotage—when members of the Patrol questioned about the smuggling that's been going on across the border. His ranchhand, Diego, was too dumb or too scared to tell us anything. Here's how Hank's crowd worked it, Sands. . . ."

Hilton explained that large numbers of Mexican cattle were being brought across the border without the custom fees being paid. He had been working on the case for months, under cover, and at last was certain, though still without concrete evidence, that the contraband stock was being smuggled across onto the lower part of Keyhole range, the wildest sort of brush country, during the darkest nights. The cattle were driven hard, thrown onto the Lazy A before daybreak, and held there until darkness came again. Then they were moved on—driven by night, held in unlikely spots by day—deep into Arizona where they were sold to dealers who asked no questions.

Russ Clayton and his Keyhole crew received the cattle and drove them to their destination, Hilton believed. Mrs. Keyhoe didn't know that her ranchhands were involved in the game. Hank Allen had known, had permitted his range to be used. There was a big profit made, and little risk taken. Some of the cattle were stolen from Mexican *ranchos*. Hilton had been south of the border, learning what he could, and he'd picked up enough about the natives to suspect Russ Clayton. . . . He'd discovered that Clayton had gotten the foreman job at Keyhole after Sam Keyhoe's murder. He'd learned about the poker game the night of the murder, and that Clayton and old Hank Allen had been in that poker game.

"I couldn't figure the other three—Langley, Ferguson and Worden—in on the smuggling business, at first," Jim Hilton told Sands. "But I learned that those three were thick as thieves, and that Clayton met with them, in Ferguson's office, every Saturday night. It began to look then as though those three reputable citizens were mixed up in the smuggling."

Sands nodded. He'd discovered that the three townsmen were Clayton's *compañeros* in much less time. He said, "So Clayton didn't want me settled on the Lazy A

because I'd learn what was going on. I'm lucky that they didn't gun me down right off, like they did Sam Keyhoe when they decided to use his range. They stop at nothing. They're trying to take the ranch away from Keyhoe's widow, by forcing her into bankruptcy. She claims that rustlers are raiding Keyhole. Those rustlers are probably her own hands." He gave Hilton a curious look. "How come you got that town lawman to turn me loose?"

"I could see that you were being framed by the crowd I want to send to the Federal pen," Hilton said. "From what I heard you say to Langley, there in the saloon, I knew that we could work together. I need help, and I haven't time to get it from my own outfit."

"What are you planning?"

"To hole up on Keyhole until tomorrow night."

"What, then?"

Hilton was reluctant to divulge his plan at once. He asked, first, "You willing to side me, Sands?" When he caught Sand's quick nod he said, "I've been contacting a Mexican *rurale*. I got word from him yesterday that a big herd of Mexican cattle was to be smuggled across the border on the night of the thirteenth. That's tomorrow night. I want to be on hand—and follow the Keyhole crew when it rides out. The *rurales* are plenty interested in seeing this crowd wiped out. There's a *revolucion* brewing down there, and the leaders of it have been dealing with the smuggling crowd up here. They send up stolen cattle. Clayton and his crowd pay for them with shipments of contraband rifles."

Sands whistled in astonishment. "This thing is big business!"

Hilton nodded. "And a risky business for us," he said flatly. "It could get us both gut-shot."

HILTON knew the Keyhole range. He'd boldly scouted it a few days before, pretending to be a cowpuncher looking for a job. Russ Clayton had angrily ordered him to clear out, but by then the border patrolman had taken the lay of the land. The spot he'd picked to hole up in was among the low rock hills that lay between Keyhole and the Lazy A. It was but

two miles from Keyhole headquarters.

It was nearly dawn when he and Sands settled themselves in the hills. They off-saddled and picketed their horses, then bedded down. They slept until sun-up, and Sands felt better when he woke. The pain in his head had diminished to a dull ache. They breakfasted on jerky andhardtack from Hilton's saddle-bag, and on water from a nearby stream. Well-hidden, Hilton took binoculars from his saddle-bag and focused them on the distant ranch headquarters. He studied Keyhole for a long time, and Sands saw him frown.

"Something wrong?"

Hilton nodded slowly.

"Looks as though I guessed wrong. The Keyhole crew is gone."

"Maybe they're out on the range."

Hilton shook his head. "Can't see any riders anywhere," he said, swinging the glasses in a wide arc. He lowered them finally, bewildered. "Maybe they headed for San Marco before sun-up, with Clayton's body. It doesn't seem likely that they'd ride south and hang around the border during the day."

"Maybe Mrs. Keyhoe knows where they've gone."

"You want to risk riding down and asking her?"

Sands said, "Sure." He didn't mention it, but he was eager to see Evelyn Keyhoe again. She'd been in his thoughts this morning.

He saddled up and rode down from the hills, crossed Keyhole range. He saw no riders. At the ranch headquarters, he saw a Chinese cook in the doorway of the cook-shack and his own hired hand of a day, the Mexican named Diego, repairing a corral fence. Diego came to meet him, sombrero held against his chest, and said, "Senor, ees good to see you alive. I feared that the Skull riders would kill you. Diego, he ees sorry he cannot work for you."

"It's all right," Sands told him. I understand." He saw Evelyn in the doorway of the ranchhouse.

She came across the veranda to meet him, relief in her eyes. "I—I've been worried, John," she said huskily. "I feared that they would kill you!"

Sands dismounted, stepped to the ver-

anda. He had to fight down a strange impulse. He wanted to take Evelyn Keyhoe into his arms. Her small son was there, playing on the veranda floor with an array of tiny wooden figures of cattle and horsemen, skillfully handcarved and painted—no doubt the work of some artistic vaquero. Sands said, "Hello, Danny," and the youngster grinned up at him in friendly fashion.

"Where's the Keyhole crew, Evelyn?" he asked.

"Hunting you, John!"

"That means they headed for San Marco. What about Clayton? Is he—?"

"He was slightly wounded. Two of the men brought him in about midnight. They bandaged his wound—it was in his left side—and gave him whiskey. He came to the house before dawn, just before he and the others rode out. He was drunk, John, and he cursed me. He told me that he would kill you just as he'd killed my husband. He admitted killing Sam. He was wild with rage and—"

Her voice had turned shrill, hinting at hysteria.

Sands caught hold of her arms, shook her a little. "Steady," he said. "You've got to hold on a little while longer. I'm not alone now. . . ." He told her about Jim Hilton and the border patrolman's plan to obtain evidence that would break up Clayton's crowd. "We're going to jump them tonight," he said. "We'll try to take Clayton alive. If we catch him in the act of smuggling cattle across the border, he's sure to talk and incriminate those three townsmen. Then you'll be safe."

"But, John, just the two of you. . . ."

"There's no time to get help."

Evelyn caught hold of his hand. "John, it's your life!" she cried. "They'll kill you, I know it! You and your friend!" There was real fear in her eyes. "John, I can't ask it. I can't have you die for me!"

He drew her to him.

He'd known her less than twenty-four hours, but it seemed that he'd known her always. It seemed only natural that he should kiss her. Afterward, he said, "It's a risk I want to take, Evelyn."

He released her, went down to his horse. As he rode away, he heard young Danny

say, "Mommie, who's that man? Mommie . . ." He didn't catch Evelyn's reply. Instead, he heard her call, "Diego—Diego!" When he looked back, she was hurrying across the ranchyard to meet the Mexican.

IT WAS late afternoon when Hilton, keeping watch with his binoculars, saw the Keyhole crew return. There were thirteen riders. They dismounted, off-saddled, trooped into the messhall. Hilton told Sands, "An early supper. They'll ride tonight."

Earlier, just after Sands returned from Keyhole, Hilton had spotted a horsemen riding away from the ranch headquarters, heading east at a hard lope and disappearing across the range. It had been Diego. Sands and Hilton had puzzled over that, wondering where Evelyn had sent the Mexican in such a hurry.

Clayton and his men saddled fresh horses at sundown, mounted and rode south. Hilton said, "This is it, Sands. The odds are thirteen to two, more than I expected. It looks as though we'd better postpone the showdown until another time—and get plenty of help."

"Let's trail them, anyway," Sands said. "Clayton may not keep the whole bunch with him once he's received the herd from the Mexican smugglers. We may have a stroke of luck."

"Right. Let's get moving."

They saddled their horses and rode southward through the hills, then dropped down to the flat country as dusk thickened. The Keyhole crew traveled at a brisk pace, but Sands and his companion had no difficulty in following the bunch. A moon rose as darkness came, giving enough light for the two men to keep their quarry in sight. It was three hours before Clayton and his men halted, deep in the rough brush country of the border. Sands and Hilton halted among some rocks, well to the rear.

It was not a long wait.

The night quiet was soon shattered by a thunder of pounding hoofs. A great herd of cattle was being driven at a fast pace. The shouts of *vaqueros* lifted above the rumble. The herd loomed through the

moonlight, not strung out as was usual on the trail but bunched up for haste. The cattle weren't stopped as Keyhole riders relieved the *vaqueros*. In a patch of moonlight, big Russ Clayton—stiffly erect in the saddle because of his wound—met and shook hands and talked with the leader of the Mexican smuggler crew.

Hilton whispered, "We'll keep trailing them. The herd will be thrown onto Lazy A ranch about daybreak, and Clayton may bed down his crew during the day. Maybe we'll get our lucky break then."

The Keyhole punchers strung the herd out somewhat, but kept it moving at the same fast pace. Russ Clayton rode point, and the cattle were gradually headed northwest. The herd was pointed toward the rock hills. John Sands and Jim Hilton followed without being noticed. The Keyhole riders didn't watch their back-trail. The noise of the drive drowned out the sound of the two horses following the herd. An hour before dawn, the cattle were driven into a narrow pass in the hills. Beyond lay the lower end of the Lazy A range.

Sands and his companion avoided the pass. They climbed a slope half a mile farther and slowly worked their way through the rocky uplifts. At dawn they looked up on the Lazy A range.

THE HERD, numbering about twelve hundred head, was being held on bunch-grass flat near a clearwater stream. Eight of the Keyhole riders were riding back toward the pass, evidently heading for Keyhole headquarters. They shortly disappeared from Sands' and Hilton's view. The other five started a fire, cooked up breakfast with grub they'd packed along.

Sands and Hilton took turns with the binoculars.

Russ Clayton was among the five guarding the herd.

Jim Hilton said, "We'll give them an hour." He took jerky and hardtack from his saddle-bag, from a seemingly endless supply, and handed some of the bone-dry grub over to John Sands. They chewed away at it, envying the Keyhole riders their hot coffee. Finally Sands used the glasses again, and saw Clayton and three others stretch out on the ground in the shade of.

a cottonwood tree. Only one man remained on guard. He mounted and rode a wide circle about the herd and the camp, and he sat slumped in the saddle, his chin on his chest. Like Sands, the Keyhole punchers were worn out from going two nights without sleep.

Finally, an hour gone and the sun climbing high, Sands and Hilton mounted and rode down from the hills by a round-about way that afforded them cover. They reached the flat country without being sighted by the Keyhole guard, and headed toward the camp with their rifles across their saddles.

The four men stretched out in the shade seemed asleep. The guard, now at the far side of the herd, appeared to doze in the saddle. The two warily approaching men were now within rifle range. Sands whispered, "Let's take cover behind those rocks."

They headed for the cluster of boulders on the near side of the narrow stream. They gained it, dismounted, ground-hitched their horses, and levelled their rifles across the rocks that gave them cover.

A shot rang out, loud against the stillness.

Sands gave a violent start, and Jim Hilton swore. They'd been baited, and now the trap was closing about them. Russ Clayton must have guessed that trouble would come, and had prepared for it. The eight riders Sands and his companion had thought were riding back to Keyhole headquarters had gone no farther than the pass in the rock hills. One of them had fired the warning shot. The bunch came riding out at a gallop, fanning out—cutting off retreat.

Russ Clayton barked an order, opened fire from where he lay.

The three men with him roused, and started shooting. The drowsy guard was alert, gun in hand. The odds were again thirteen to two.

Sands was so taken by surprise that he was slow in opening up with his rifle. Hilton, more accustomed to this sort of game, said flatly, "All we can do is take some of the sons with us, Sands. Give it to 'em!" The border patrolman started shooting.

The rocks covered the two from the fire of Clayton and the men with him, so

Sands opened up on the riders coming in from the flank. His first shot was a lucky one; it tore a man from his galloping horse. His second missed. His third knocked off a rider's hat. Hilton downed a rider, then uttered a groan as a slug found him.

Hilton was drilled through the left arm, but he wasn't out of it. He dropped his rifle, drew his sixgun. The yelling, shooting riders swerved, rode beyond accurate bullet range. Sands fired a couple shots after them, hoping to keep them at that distance. They dismounted; dropped behind cover—behind rocks, brush, anything handy. And started sniping.

They had their quarry hemmed in.

Sands and Hilton moved deeper among the boulders, crouching low as the slugs shrieked overhead or thudded against the rocks. Hilton's wound was bleeding badly; his forearm had been mangled by a .45 slug. Sands took his handkerchief and bound it tightly about Hilton's arm, above the elbow, and the flow of blood slowed. Hilton's lank face was grayish, and he said thickly, "They won't rush again. They'll just make a siege of it—take their time and pick us off."

"They're sure determined," Sands muttered.

"Why not? If we get away, it means the pen for them."

"Think we can make a run for it?"

"They'll cut us down when we mount up," Hilton said.

THE SUN climbed, brassy bright, and the heat it was a crushing weight on the wounded Hilton. Sweat dripped from him. He looked sick. The sniping continued, growing intense at intervals. Time dragged, seemed endless. Sands kept watch against a rush, moving from one boulder to another, firing an occasional shot just to keep Keyhole from closing in. By midday, Hilton was all in. He lay face down, seldom moving.

"Sands!" It was Clayton's harsh voice. "You hear, Sands?"

He was foisted up behind the gnarled trunk of the cottonwood. The three punchers with him were crouched in a shallow arroyo. The only Keyhole man still mounted

was the fellow guarding the herd, and he kept at the far side of the grazing cattle—well beyond rifle range.

Clayton yelled again.

It wasn't possible that he wanted to make a deal. He held the winning hand, and knew it. Sands called out, "What do you want, Clayton?" He wasn't very curious.

"You're done for Sands," Clayton yelled. He just wanted to taunt the trapped man. "I told you that you'd let the woman talk you into a grave. That snooper with you ain't so smart, either. I know about him. Milt Ferguson got that old badge-toter, Newlin, tangled up in his own lie. Newlin admitted he'd let a border patrolman take you out of the lock-up. Hell; it was easy to figure out what the two of you would try to pull!"

Sands kept silent, alert, fearing that Clayton was trying to throw him off guard so that the men at the other side of Sands' position could rush the rocks. But the attack didn't come.

"I'm done fooling with you," Clayton called out. "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to stampede that Mex herd right into those rocks you're holed up in. How'd you like that, Sands?"

Sands didn't like it, at all. A stampede of twelve hundred snaky longhorned cattle would certainly end the fight in a hurry. The herd had been drifting south while it grazed, and now was at least half a mile to the south. The distance kept them from being spooked by the racketing gunfire. That and the hunger that kept them grazing. The herd couldn't have been on grass for several days. Yes, a stampede would finish it.

Clayton started shooting again. The men east of Sands' position joined in, heavily. With the gunfire pinning Sands down, the three punchers left the arroyo and ran for their horses. Sands risked getting hit to slam a couple shots their way. The shots missed. The trio hightailed it south, toward the herd.

Sands thought Hilton was unconscious—hoped that he was. The border patrolman would die without a knowledge of the thundering death. Sands looked despairingly at his and Hilton's horse. The animals had drifted away, scared off by the shooting,

well beyond reach. There was no chance of making a run for it. But Sands wondered if he shouldn't try. Bullets crashing into him might be an easier death than being crushed under a juggernaut of crazed cattle.

It took the riders at the herd quite a while.

But now the cattle began to move. First at a walk, then at a pounding run. The riders had gotten them spooked by shooting off their guns. As always in a stampede, the cattle became a solid mass of hurtling force. A force that nothing could stop abruptly.

Sands had his moment of panic. The same instant a savage hatred gripped him, and he knew how he was going to die. He was going to start running—toward Russ Clayton's position behind the cottonwood. Clayton would get him, of course, but somehow he was going to get Clayton before he went down.

Sands dropped his rifle, drew his six-gun, crept to the west side of the massed rocks. Then Hilton's voice stopped him: "Sands!"

Hilton had hauled himself up to his knees.

"Look, Sands—!"

SANDS looked in the direction the border patrolman was peering. He couldn't believe his own eyes. For the Keyhole men to the east were fleeing towards their horses. A big band of horsemen—Mexicans by their big sombreros—had emerged from the pass and were charging across the flat. They rode as only *vaqueros* could ride, and they were shooting as they came on at a wild gallop. Some of the band raced to intercept and turn the stampeding cattle. They got between the herd and the rocks. . . . The man in the lead was a Mexican John Sands knew—Diego.

These were the *vaqueros* who had ridden for Sam Keyhoe, and Evelyn had sent Diego to bring them back—and fight for Keyhole!

Sands saw that Diego and his riders would succeed in turning the spooked cattle past the rocks, that Hilton would be safe. He started running then as he'd planned, toward Russ Clayton.

The burly ex-Keyhole ramrod was fleeing toward his horse. Sands halted, took aim, shot Clayton through the left leg. He'd checked his hatred of the man, remembering that Hilton needed Clayton to incriminate his partners. And it was those three townsmen, even more than Russ Clayton, who were responsible for this high-staked game of death and dealing in contraband.

Clayton went down, howling savagely as he fell.

He rolled over, shoved himself into a sitting position. He'd clung to his sixgun. The man had a will of iron. He sighted his weapon at Sands, thumbed back the trigger. Sands' gun roared again, and the slug tore through Clayton's shoulder. Clayton was knocked flat on his back. He'd dropped his gun. But still he wasn't finished. He heaved himself over onto his belly, tried to pick up the gun with his left hand.

Sands stood over him.

"Pick it up," he said bitterly. "Go ahead, pick it up. I'll shoot you through the other arm. Go ahead, Clayton!"

The hopelessness of his position was finally understood by Russ Clayton. He sagged down, uttering incoherent sounds that were like sobs.

IT WAS not until the following day that John Sands visited Keyhole again. He'd gone to San Marco with Jim Hilton and the prisoner, Russ Clayton. The town doctor had patched up both wounded men, and Clayton had been put to bed, a very sick man, in a cell in Marshal Newlin's lock-

up. Some of the Keyhole riders had escaped the *vaqueros'* guns and reached town, and warned Milt Ferguson. The lawyer had left with Langley and Worden. But Hilton was sure that those three could be picked up by the law within a short time. Clayton had talked. He'd given Hilton plenty of evidence against his three partners, but he'd refused to confess to murdering Sam Keyhoe. He'd blamed the dead Hank Allen. But he'd not bargained on Allen's hand, Diego. Hank Allen had once told the Mexican that Clayton had killed Sam Keyhoe, and Diego, no longer afraid of the men he called Skull riders, talked.

Evelyn was waiting on the ranchhouse veranda.

She was smiling. Some of the *vaqueros* had returned to Keyhole and told her how the showdown fight had ended.

Sands dismounted. When he faced her, his mind was made up. He said, "It was your *vaqueros* who really settled it, Evelyn. I'd be dishonest if I held you to our bargain."

"You want out of it, John?"

"Well, no. But I've got to play square with you. I owe you more than you owe me. I would have died out there if . . .

"Suppose I insist upon holding you to your bargain?"

"Maybe I'd like that," Sands said.

He knew that Evelyn was thinking of more than having him a partner in Keyhole Ranch. She'd lived alone for two years now, and—"I need you, John," she said softly. Sands nodded. "I guess you do," he replied, reaching for her.

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Marshal of Wheel-Gap

By W. V. ATHANAS

Big John Colson was one hell of a Town Marshal, walking around without a gun, and it didn't surprise anybody when a slick-holstered bad-hat ran him out of Art's Saloon. But then someone shouted: "He's comin' back!"

WE CAME BACK FROM BURYING Jimmie Vain, and like always happens after a burying, especially on a bad day, we dropped in at Art's for a drink or so. Wally brought it up first, and we talked about it a bit, and then went over to my place to talk some more about it.

"What we need," said Wally, "is a new Marshal, and quick."

"Well," I said, "that didn't take much thinking."

"We'd better do some thinkin' about it," said Wally, "or we're going to find ourselves with a mess on our hands."

Wally should have been a prophet. Because he'd no more than said it, when a couple of mighty loud shots bellowed out in the street.

I ain't no coward, but I let a couple of the others poke their heads out first to see what was going on. I heard a couple more shots, and they didn't duck, so I took a look.

There was one of the boys, a miner fresh off the diggings, loaded for bear. He was straddling a little old moth-eaten burro, and he had a long-barreled Remington percussion-cap six-shot pistol in his hand. About every three steps that the burro took, he'd lay his head back, let out a bellow at the sky and blast loose with that cannon. I yanked my head back in. I'd rather see a dyed-in-the-wool badman behind a pistol than a damned fool.

Anyway, he was the clincher. Between him and a few other of the boys off the creeks, they pretty well tore the town apart that night. If Jimmie Vain had been around, he'd have straightened a few of them out, and things would have been pretty quiet. But like I said, we'd just come back from burying Jimmie Vain.

It went on for two weeks, and then Wally came around one evening with a letter.

"I told you," said Wally, "we needed a man here. So after we talked it over, I sent a letter to one I knew, and here's what he says."

IT WAS ALL WRITTEN out in sharp up-and-down letters, square on the page, and nice spaced lines. A man's handwriting tells you a lot about him, if you look at it right, and I said to myself, *there's a man with a lot of determination, and a pretty orderly way of thinking.*

I could tell that by the way he spaced his words, and made the letters match for size. You can't do that in a hurry. And the letter was short, sweet and to the point.

"Gentlemen," he wrote, "I reply to your letter to say that I would be more than happy to discuss the Position Of City Marshal with you. I have just concluded the sale of some of my property here, and will be available by the time you receive this letter.

"As to my qualifications, I served as a Corporal in The Fourteenth O. Reg. of Infantry, and was employed as a Civilian Scout for three years afterward. I gave up a Career of Arms to become a farmer and stock breeder, and later served both as Deputy Sheriff and Sheriff of this County. You may write for reference to the following men in this county, all of which are Solid Citizens, and whose word is good."

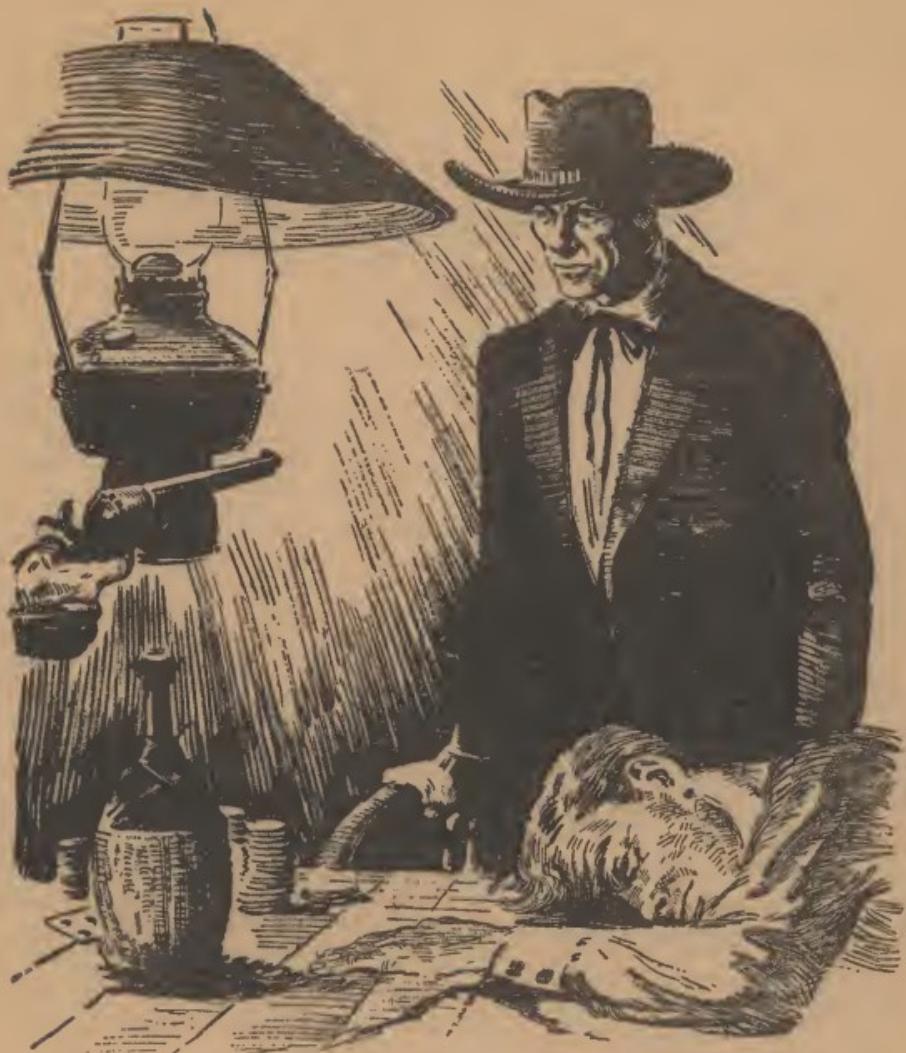
There was a little bit more and then his name. John Colson.

"Well," said Wally, "what do you think?"

"Sounds all right to me," I said.

Blake Vount studied the letter a while longer. "Sounds like a smart man," he observed. "Uses a lot of big words like 'quali—qualifications', and slings the ink like a real educated man."

"And what," I inquired, "kind of a shot



*"I'm goin' to count to ten, and if you ain't out of that door by then,
I'm goin' to shoot you right through the guts. . . ."*

with a gun does that make him?"

"Aw hell," said Wally. "He's been a peace officer for a long time and he's still kickin', ain't he? Stands to reason he can take care of himself."

So finally I voted along with the rest to send for him, and Wally rode forty miles to Lodge to send him a telegram to come and take the job. He came in on the stage four days later.

He was a fine looking man, I'll say that for him. About six foot one or two, maybe

two hundred and twenty or so, and no fat on him. He was wearing a dark brown suit and half-boots with flat heels and a wide-brimmed flat topped Kansas hat. Blue eyes and square chin. Big beak of a nose and a way of looking you right in the eye when he talked. I liked him right off. And he didn't talk much.

Wally and Blake showed him over the town and fixed him up with a room, and then turned him loose to go to work. There wasn't much to do that day or the

next, because most of the boys on the creeks were digging up that first million, and the riders weren't due in until Saturday.

He was sitting on a bale of hay at my place this next afternoon, chewing on a straw with his hat on the back of his head, and we were talking about this and that, when the ruckus busted loose in the Bull Head, about halfway up the street.

I heard a shot, and I looked around and said, "Well, John, looks like business for you." And by golly he wasn't there!

I LOOKED up the street, and he wasn't in sight, but a couple of fellows were busting the batwings off the door of the Bull Head trying to get out in a hurry, and pretty soon here came a big bearded lad out, mean drunk and with a smoking gun in his hand. Then I spotted John Colson.

He must have gone out of my place by the back way, because he was easing his way along the wall of the Bull Head, coming from the back.

This boy with the beard and the gun fired a shot each way up and down the street, let out a few cuss words and wheeled back to the door of the Bull Head.

Then John stepped out onto the walk along side him.

"Give me that gun," he said. I could hear it from where I was.

He pretty near got it. Because that boy with the beard swings around like a cat, and mind you, he's got his gun in his hand. He swings, like I said, and he's bringing that gun right onto John's belt buckle, when John hits him.

It was just like the sound you hear in the slaughter-houses, when they hit a steer with a maul. The bearded lad up-ended, and slid on his back for about five feet on the rough walk, and he didn't get up. John stooped over and picked up the gun, and then he straightened up with this bird by the collar.

He came dragging him down the walk past my place, pulling him along like he wasn't nothing more than a sack of spuds.

John stopped when he came to me, and said, just as calm and mild as you please, "Jake, where do I lock the fellow up? The

boys showed me my office, but they didn't show me any lock-up."

I pulled my jaw back into working position.

"That log shack back of your office," I managed to say. "There's no windows, and you cinch the door with that log chain and a padlock."

"Thanks, Jake," he said, and tramped on down the street, still hauling that bird along by the collar.

Gilly Martin had been holding up a wall down the street, and he was taking it all in. He came up the street, and hitched up his gun belt when he came to me.

"He wouldn't do that to me," he said.

"Why don't you try him?" I suggested. Gilly gave me one of his mean crooked grins.

"Maybe I will," he said, and swaggered on up the street.

WELL, I'm no johnny-come-lately in this country. I was in Abilene in '71, when Wild Bill Hickok was Marshal. I've heard many a shot fired in anger, and I've busted a few cartridges myself. Course since I've reached the years to have good sense, and grown quite a lap over my belt buckle, I've found that a man don't have to be scared to be cautious, but I'm damned if I ever saw the beat of this John Colson.

If it had been my job to take in that boy with the gun, I'd have been plenty sure that I had iron in my hand; yes, and with the hammer back, too. A crazy drunk will kill you just as quick as a John Wes Hardin.

I said as much when John Colson came back from locking his man up.

"John," I said, "what in tarnation did you have on your mind, walking up to that bird like that?"

"Why," he said mildly, "he didn't mean any harm. He was just full of fightin' likker, and wanted to make a little noise." He reached into his hip pocket and wiped his forehead.

"Big bugger, though," he said. "Got up a sweat draggin' him all the way over to the lockup."

Then I let out a grunt. I watched real close, when he put that handkerchief back, and there wasn't a sign of a gun on him.

"John Colson," I said. "Do you mean to stand there and tell me you ain't even got a gun on you?"

"Why," he said, looking at me sort of slow and wondering. "No, to tell the truth. I left it in my room this morning, and never thought about it until just now."

Well, I sat down quick.

"You *what*?" I gasped.

"Why," he said sort of surprised, "there's no call to throw a gun on a drunk, just because he's whoopin' it up a little."

"Son," I said, "I better straighten you out on a few things. This ain't Abilene, no. But on the other hand, it ain't no Ladies Aid Society. This was always a lively town when there was just the punchers from the valley ranches hitting here of a Saturday night, or a bunch of 'em dropping in from a drive. But since they found gold in the creeks, this little town of Wheel Gap has blossomed out wide and handsome."

"You take a bunch of stakey miners and mix 'em with a bunch of proud cow-punchers, and you got plenty of friction. Then you shake in a pretty fair dribble of toughs and bucko boys that follow the easy money, and you got trouble. You follow me?"

"Sure," he said, slow and easy. "But . . ."

"Now," I interrupted, "we had a problem on our hands, right after the strike was made in the creeks. We had shootings and ruckuses till we were sick of it. About ten of us got together, after it got to the point where Wheel Gap had to have a dead man for breakfast every day, and formed a committee. We hung three of them, and sent a half a dozen more over the hill afoot, and then we had a little peace. Compared to what it was, you understand."

John Colson nodded to show he did.

"Well," I continued, "we got tired of this business of losing sleep and money from not tending to our businesses, so we hired a Marshal. He got shot at four or five times, and he went over the hill without collecting his wages. Then we hired Jimmie Vain. He was a good man, and fast with a gun. We buried him three

weeks ago. That's when we sent for you.

"And now," I practically yelled at him, "you leave your gun in your room! What's the matter? Don't you want to live till payday?"

He grinned at me. A big, slow, easy-going grin.

"Shucks, Jake," he said, "I can take care of myself."

"All right," I snorted, throwing my hands in the air. "I give up. I warned you." I shook a finger at him, meaning every word I said. "You ain't herdin' a bunch of farmers around here, John Colson—remember that. These boys are used to settling things in Judge Colt's court, and you're going to play hell trying to slap lead out of the air with your fists."

Then I wheeled and got away from him. I didn't want his blood on my hands.

AND that's the way it went. Sometimes he carried a gun, and sometimes he didn't, although it was hard to tell. When he did wear one, he had it belted high and under his coat, where it was hard to get at. Hell of a way to pack a gun if you ask me—which he didn't.

Wheel Gap rocked right along. Big John—everybody called him that now—strolled around town all the time, stopping here and there to talk it over, and by the devil's own luck, happening to be right on the spot every time some yahoo decided to liven things up.

He was a smooth hairpin, all right. I saw him, a half dozen times, step in between a couple of birds that were squaring off, and by George, he'd talk 'em out of it half the time. When he couldn't talk 'em out of it, why then there was just a couple of smacks and cracks with those big fists of his, and down the street would come Big John, dragging a couple of customers for the lockup.

Then this thing happened that made a lot of us wonder. We were in Art's place, Blake and I and Wally. Since Millie died two years ago, there isn't much reason for me to go home when I'm done for the day—in fact it's hard to get used to an empty house even yet. So I usually stop in at Art's for a shot or two before supper. and sort of chew the fat with the boys for

a bit.

Well, we were standing there, talking about this and that, and a ruckus started at one of the tables. Art has no house men playing his tables. He has a man who sits in and keeps track of cards and deal and such. He pulls in a chip once in a while to pay the rent of the table, and that's all.

Now this bird, rider by his dress, blasted loose with a few cuss words about cheatin', and yanked out his gun. He reached across the table and cracked another fellow, miner, by his looks. Hit him a dirty lick with the barrel of his gun and laid the side of the fellow's head wide open. And Big John walked right in on it.

Big John walked up to the bird with the gun.

"Hand it over," he said, not raising his voice any.

But this bird jumped back and laid the gun on Big John's middle. I had him spotted now, one of the bucko boys we'd been watching. Hung around town most of the time, always had money, and would do anything but work. One of Gilly Martin's bunch.

Art sees what was going on, and he reached under the bar for his double-barreled Greener, but then Gilly Martin got up from the table with a gun in his hand too. He laid a nasty look on Art, and Art shrugged and put his hands on the bar.

"Give me that gun," repeated Big John, paying no attention to Gilly.

This bird, Johnson, his name was, got that look on his face. You've seen the way a locoed horse looks, with the whites of his eyes showing all around the centers? Well, that's the look Johnson had, like he was locoed. I wouldn't have prodded him with a ten-foot pole.

"Stand clear," he snarled. "You ain't goin' to lay them hands on me. You're done shovin' people around in this town."

I was surprised at Big John. He just stood there, with his face like wood, his hands at his sides.

"Better give me the gun," he said, mild and gentle. "It'll save trouble."

"Ya-a-ah," sneered Johnson. He leaned a little toward Big John and raised the

gun. "Listen, Big John," he said, "you're done. I'm goin' to count to ten, and if you ain't out of that door by then, I'm goin' to shoot you right through the guts. One!"

I sneaked a quick look at Art. He was getting purple in the face and his hands were sliding off the bar. Gilly noticed it and hitched his gun up an inch. Gilly was taking it all in and grinning like a chessy cat.

"Two!" said Johnson. "Three!"

Big John stood there, getting white around the lips. He sort of rubbed his elbow against his hip, and I could tell from the way he did it that this was another time he had come out without his gun.

"Four," whispered Johnson. "Five!"

I was sweating blood. Everybody knows I don't carry a gun any more, and they weren't paying attention to me. But there was nothing I could do, and besides I ain't no damn fool. With two crazy birds like them with guns in their hands, it was no time for me to be getting gay.

"Six!" said Johnson, and the gun was quivering just the least bit in his hand. I looked at his eyes and looked away quick.

"Seven," he said.

And Big John gave way. He looked at Johnson for a second longer. Then he shrugged. And turned and walked right out the door!

Well, I thought, there goes another one over the hill, without waiting for payday.

I SAW Wally the next morning.

"Wally," I said, "it looks like your man ran into some tougher competition than he figured on. Got anybody else in mind for the Marshal's job?" I admit I was a little sarcastic, but the whole situation didn't look too good to me.

Wally gave me a kind of a funny look, and was just opening his mouth to say something, when a deep baritone voice hailed us.

"Good morning, Jake, Wally."

I whirled around, and there, by George, was Big John. He looked just a calm and chipper as if nothing had happened, with one important exception. Belted outside his coat was the biggest and fanciest holster I ever saw, and in that holster was

nothing less than a Walker model Colt. You don't see them much any more, but you remember what they look like. Nine-inch barrel, no top strap over the cylinder. You load from the front of the cylinder with a paper cartridge and a ball, and crimp percussion caps on the nipples on the back shoulder of the cylinder. Weigh four and a half or five pounds. There's been lots of proven cases where they've been used to kill buffalo.

"Kee-rimemy!" I blurted out. "Goin' bear huntin'?"

Big John gave me that wide slow grin of his.

"Why," he said, "I understand this bunch of roughs around here would just as soon shoot a peace officer as look at him. Isn't this what you advised me to do —take precautions?"

I looked at him a moment and shook my head. He had me baffled, all right.

"Now," said Big John, "I want it clearly understood. From this minute forth, the law in Wheel Gap gets tough." I looked at him and he wasn't grinning even a little bit. "No sir," he continues, "we don't handle anybody with kid gloves from now on. The man that looks like he wants to pull a gun on me from now on better come a-shootin', cause I ain't takin' any more chances."

I looked at Wally, and he was standing there with his mouth open. I told him he'd better shut his trap before the flies blewed his tonsils, and he gave me a kind of a hurt look and left.

But from then on, Big John seemed to take his duties seriously. He was still just like a clock, patrolling the whole town at a casual saunter, stopping in at every saloon and deadfall in town, but always with that big Colt swinging at his hip, and darned seldom a grin on his face. And believe me, things were peaceful around him.

He had the usual run of drunks on the prod, of course, but it was a revelation, the way he treated them now. He still had his nose for trouble, but he never walked into it anymore.

Let some bird get nasty, and Big John would drop in on him, but usually from a side door, so that he came up behind the

man in question. Big John would put the arm on him, and if his man objected even a little bit, out would come that long Walker Colt to look that boy right in the eye. He'd go along, all right.

But somehow, it wasn't the same either. Big John didn't come around to my place to shoot the bull any more. He walked like a cat, and watched every move anybody made sort of sideways, and he sort of moved through Wheel Gap like a cold breeze.

I WAS standing in the doorway of my place watching him move up the street this morning, watching the way his big shoulders moved under his coat, when I heard Gilly Martin's voice in my ear.

"I see he packs his gun in the open now," said Gilly.

"Yeah," I said. I made it pretty curt, I guess, but then I want no part of Gilly Martin. He stood there, leaning against the sunny front wall of my place, with his ever-lasting sneering grin on his face.

I said, "Yes, Big John's doing a lot of things different, nowadays. I don't think you'll rig a trap for him again, like that last one."

That stung him. He wheeled away from the wall and laid a hand on his gun butt. That nasty smile of his was wiped plumb clean.

He gave me his old business of slitting his eyes at me like a hungry wolf. "What are you trying to cook up?" he asked in a mean voice.

"Cookin' nothing," I told him, and I didn't lower my voice any. "I ain't blind. And don't you go gettin' ideas about using that gun. You and everybody else knows I don't carry a smoke pole these days. You ain't man enough to buck the medicine you'll get if you try any funny stuff on me."

"Ya-a-ah," he sneered, but he took his hand off the gun. "You old grand-paws around here make me sick, trying to run this town like a Sunday school."

"Us grand-paws," I said, "did all right a while back. Most of us have forgotten more real trouble than you'll ever live to see, and we're sick of it." I was getting

pretty hot under the collar by now. "And if you don't take your ugly face away from here right now," I said, "I'm just going to beat you about half to death with a fork handle." I would've too, but he took me at my word and left.

"All right," he said, and that sneering grin came back. "But if you want to see some fireworks, you just be handy when that tin-horn Marshal of yours tries to get gay with me. The first funny move he makes, he's going to get it right in the guts."

That was different. Gilly took some stuff off me that he wouldn't off anybody else. He knew Wally and me and Art. And he knew we meant just what we said. If he bucked one, he'd have to shoot his way out of town through the rest of us. Maybe we're all on the shady side of fifty, but we ain't forgot which end of a gun the lead comes out of, and Gilly damned well knew it.

But sure as hell we couldn't wet-nurse our Marshal. He was a man grown, and he was armed, same as Gilly.

He was always wild, that Gilly Martin, from the time he was a kid. He's been in and out of jams ever since he learned to fire a gun. He never worked more than a week in his life, and he hangs around with a bunch that does the same. He's killed two men that I know of, and take it from me, he's just chain-lightning with a Colt. Added to that, he's as irresponsible as the wind. I tell you, it made me sweat.

I WENT HOME, and dug my old Wells Fargo Colt out of the trunk, and cleaned the grease off it. Then I loaded it and put fresh caps on all the nipples. When I went back, I had that gun rammed under the waistband of my pants, on the left side where my coat covered it.

Then I hunted up Big John. "John," I said, "Gilly Martin is in town."

"I saw him," he said.

"Well," I said, knowing I had no business saying it, "Gilly is going to make trouble if he can."

"Let him," said John. I began to get about half sore. He wasn't being any help at all.

"Then you probably know," I said sar-

castically, "that it wasn't Johnson that braced you last time. He was just doing Gilly's dirty work."

"I know it," he said.

"All right, you proud damned fool," I yelled. "Go it your own gait then. But don't say I didn't tell you. That kid is plumb poison."

"I know it," he said simply, and for a moment he was the old Big John. "But it's just one of those things I got to handle. What else can I do?"

Well, I'll admit I had some sort of idea of passing the word to some of the other boys and easing Gilly out of town before trouble started, but now I saw it wouldn't work.

They'd backed Big John down once, and it was up to him to straighten it out. I guess maybe the fact that the bunch of us had been sort of keeping an eye on the town so long had blinded me to the fact that Big John was more than just our handy man. He was a man with responsibility—and pride. If Gilly and his bunch ran another sandy on Big John, he might as well leave town. Sooner or later one of them would get him, and they'd devil him until the chance came.

I went back to my place and sat down in my office and tried to work on the books. I wound up staring at the wall and thinking in circles.

One of Art's boys stuck his head in about five thirty.

"Art says to tell you Gilly's at his Place," he reported. I heaved a sigh. The word was getting around.

"All right," I said, and went outside and looked up the street.

I spotted Big John going into the hotel dining-hall up the street, and figured he was going to get his supper. I waited.

HE CAME OUT in about half an hour, and stood in the half-dusk rolling a smoke. Then he started his saunter down the street. He had to pass four places before he came to the side street, and then there were three more before Art's.

He came out of the Bull Head, looked up and down the street, then strolled on to the next place. It was getting darker, and

lights were coming on in the places that were open.

It was the light that did it. I looked up when Art lit up the big lamps in his place. The light was spilling out the side window, where there's a little alley-way between the two buildings. Gilly was coppering his bets. His sidekick Johnson ducked back as the light hit him, but I saw him.

Now, I thought, it ain't interfering if I even up the odds. So I stepped over a bit to get a clear shot and eased up my old Wells-Fargo. I laid the sights right on Johnson's head, then pulled to one side. I knocked a splinter a yard long off the wall about a foot from his head. He whirled and reached for his gun, and I threw dirt all over his boots. He beat it, fast. In a minute I heard a horse leaving the alley on the run. I stuck the gun back in my waistband.

All of a sudden a voice came right by my elbow. "What's all the fuss?" asked Big John.

I jumped. I hadn't heard him coming, and nobody's accused me of being deaf yet.

"Just a coyote," I said, casual as I could. "Sneakin' into town for garbage, I reckon. Must be gettin' old. Missed him."

Big John grunted. I stuck out my neck for him again.

"He's in Art's place, John," I said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," he said, and melted off in the dark again.

I slipped over the street in a minute, and took up Johnson's place at the side window. I had a good view of the proceedings from there. The window had a broken pane in it, and Art had pasted a sheet of paper over the hole. I cut a hole in it about the size of a hat crown and settled down.

Gilly was there, all right. It was just like that crazy punk to pick a spot like this. It wouldn't do for him to just shoot John. No, he had to have an audience, and he was making the most of it. He had the whole end of the bar to himself, and he was enjoying it.

He had his hat on the back of his head, and a drink at his elbow. That foxy sneering grin was on his face, and he was

keeping a sharp eye on the door. I felt like whistling at him so he could see who was at his window-hole, but I didn't.

THEN Big John came in. But nobody saw him come but me. The store-room door behind Gilly began to ease open, and then Big John stepped through it sideways. He sauntered up behind Gilly, and lifted Gilly's gun out of the holster before Gilly knew what was happening.

Gilly whirled, his face as white as chalk, and slapped a hand to his empty holster. I could see his chin working.

"Hear you were looking for me," said Big John.

Gilly pulled himself up and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He was getting his nerves under control again.

"I was," he said with his nasty smile. "But it looks like you're afraid to come in the front way and face me."

Gilly's eyes flickered over to the window, but I didn't show myself. Then I pretty near dropped dead of shock.

"All right, Gilly," Big John was saying. "You think you have to have it out with me. All right."

He stepped around in front of Gilly. He made a long reach with his left hand and dropped Gilly's gun back in his holster.

"Now, Gilly," he said, soft and deadly. "You got your gun. I'm going to reach into my breast coat pocket and flip a handkerchief in the air. When you see that handkerchief, you do what you damned please."

And Big John reached to his left breast pocket, with his right hand. I groaned right out loud. Gilly was cocked, ready, and Big John penalized his gun hand by a good two feet!

He flipped the handkerchief into the air all right, but he never reached for his gun. His left hand came out of his side pocket at the same time with a short gun in it, and he pressed it gently against Gilly's belly. Gilly never even got started.

Big John was talking to Gilly like a dutch uncle.

"Now, young feller," he said, "you seem to be laboring under the delusion that you are a gun-slinger. You're just an unweaned calf, Gilly. I could have killed you

at will, three different times tonight. I didn't." He didn't sound mad or anything, just reasonable and calm. "The trouble with you, Gilly, is that you can't see over your nose. Now I'm going to show you something."

He reached over and plucked Gilly's gun out of its holster, pointed it at the ceiling and let the hammer drop. It simply clicked.

"See," said Big John. "When I lifted your gun, I palmed a shell out of the gate and set the empty chamber under the hammer. That's an old trick, and it's killed better men than you. I told you to watch my right hand, and like a kid at the fair, you did. You didn't even see me pull that left hand gun."

I wish you could have seen Gilly's face. He could hardly pry his jaw off his chest, it was hanging that far down. I could tell how he felt. He'd been braced to kill a man, and here he was getting a talking-to like a ten-year-old.

"You see," continued Big John, "you're

just an amateur. I hear you killed two men." He was talking just as casually as if he was counting eggs. "I've killed ten, in my time, and I ain't a bit proud of it. And Gilly, any one of them could have killed you, blindfolded. Remember that?" And by George, if he didn't hand Gilly back his gun!

Gilly took one last look around the room and put a longing glance at the window. I shoved my face up to the hole so he could see me.

"Johnson just left town," I observed. Gilly looked at me for a damn few seconds before he made up his mind. He headed for the door, and the last we heard of him was his horse making tracks over the hill.

Wally hollered from inside. "Jake, you old son of a gun, come on in and set 'em up. You and your talk about the man for the job." Wally was really crowing.

"All right," I said. "The drinks are on me. Big John's our man."

FANCY DRAW

(Concluded from p. 32)

Big Bill Linahan swung around, as though he had been stung, and everyone gaped. Danny Kerrick stood just inside the batwings, his blue eyes dark in his deathly pale face. The blonde hair curling from under his hat and his long eyelashes made him look like a frail girl. He looked more like he was twelve than sixteen, and the weight of the gun dragging at his leg made the gunbelt cut into his waist just like when folks in Lario had first seen him.

True Slim did a very curious thing, then. He scuttled over behind Danny and using the batwings for support, he got to his feet. His face was all marked up by the boots and the dry sobs were still wracking his body. He peered over the boy's shoulder at Big Bill Linahan and his battered face twisted. "Hank drew first," he told Big Bill, his voice high and touched with hysteria. "I told you he did!"

It took Big Bill Linahan a little while

to figure the thing on, but you could see the changes in his face as the thoughts came to him. People said afterward that the first thing they remembered was that none of the three, Jasper, True Slim or Danny—had ever said who killed Hank, or the strangers, either. And the next thing they thought of was that the two strangers and Big Bill had made the same mistake. They'd never thought that the crippled marshal might have passed his skill on to his younker.

Big Bill Linahan's face showed he knew his mistake, when he started his draw. It was probably the fastest draw he had ever made in his life, because he knew it had to be, but it wasn't fast enough. Danny Kerrick's slender fingers flicked out his heavy forty-five as though he had magic in his hand. Big Bill didn't fire at all, and Danny fired just once. His bullet caught the Double Yoke owner squarely between the eyes.

HEIR TO A .44

By Bill Chambers

He was just a skinny, blue-eyed button who could walk under a heifer with his Sunday hat on . . . but Tuck Belmont had a nose for skunks—human variety—and for a pint-sizer, he could give a gallon o' sixgun back-chat . . .



The .44 in the kid's hand spoke like a cannon . . .

SHERIFF BRAD HENDERSON was pressing the aged rancher for an immediate decision: "You've got to tell what you know, Fred," he told the cattleman. "Your testimony will send Ace Reynolds to the gallows. You can't let the people of Concho down now, and it's our chance to put an end to Reynolds and his gang of murderin' coyotes."

Old Fred Belmont did not speak for a moment. He let his tired grey eyes rest briefly on a pair of small boots in

a corner of his cabin, and a boy's slicker that hung above them on a wooden peg.

"It's not myself I'm thinking of, if I give that testimony," he said, finally. "It's little Tuck that will suffer if they get me like they did some others who bucked Reynolds and his outfit."

Sheriff Henderson looked at his watch impatiently while Belmont finished, then he said, "This time we've got Reynolds. Judge Briggs will pronounce the death penalty today, when you tell the court you saw Reynolds ride away from Mason's

homestead. And you're the only one who heard Mason's last words."

Belmont looked up at Henderson. "You've got Reynolds all right," he said. "But you've never said a word about Lobo Kane. You know he's still loose and his pack of killers with him."

"Don't worry about that," Henderson cut in. "Lobo Kane's on the run, and he heads for the Mexican border when things are too hot for his outfit."

"It might be hot for Lobo Kane," Belmont said stubbornly. "But you've heard he's an old partner of Ace Reynolds. My son died with a bullet in his back on account of that knowledge. Don't underestimate that Lobo Kane skunk. He's wiser in a lot of ways than Reynolds."

Henderson was thoughtful for a moment. Finally, he said: "I know Lobo Kane and his bunch are capable of doing a lot of things, but they'd have to come out in the open now, if they tried to help Reynolds. If they do that, we'll be ready for them. I even got deputies in from Springerville. There'll be plenty of lawmen sprinkled among the crowd."

Belmont moved his chair back from the table and stood up. "I've got to do it, I suppose," he said. "But I hate to think what will happen before it's finished."

Belmont's movements were slow, as he examined an old revolver and buckled on a gun belt studded with .45 shells. His hair was almost white and his shoulders were stooped a little with his sixty-five years. His voice was steady, but a little lower when he spoke again. "We'd better go before Tuck gets back. I'll leave a note."

AS THE old rancher drew a scratchpad from the table drawer, the snort of a horse and a boyish voice announced the arrival of Tucker Belmont. He was old Fred's grandson and the last of the Arizona Belmonts.

Tuck had just passed his twelfth birthday. His entrance was brisk and cheerful. He recognized Sheriff Henderson and shook his hand. His keen blue eyes fell, almost instantly, to the gun at his grandfather's right hip. "What's up, grandad?"

he asked, looking quickly from Belmont to the eyes of Sheriff Henderson and back again.

"It's a little business in town, son," Belmont said. "And I've got to get some supplies, too. I'll be back before sundown."

Turning to the sheriff, the boy asked: "Is today Ace Reynolds' murder trial?"

Henderson nodded.

Tuck Belmont, in spite of his twelve years, was not easily fooled. His life had not been an easy one. His mother had died at his birth and his father had been shot in the back before Tuck was old enough to remember much about it. He knew that his father's murderer had never been apprehended, but his alert young mind retained stories that pointed to Ace Reynolds.

Tuck was sensible enough not to ask questions when his grandfather put on his hat and looked toward the sheriff. He could sense trouble and he knew grandfather Belmont would be an important figure in it.

There was a moment of silence, then Sheriff Henderson spoke: "How's that roan horse you got for your birthday, Tuck?"

"Finest horse in the valley, Mister Henderson. I'll let you ride him if you want to, some time."

Fred Belmont had walked toward the door beside the sheriff. He turned, as if to say a parting word to Tuck, and his eyes dropped to a telltale bulge under the boy's leather jacket. He hesitated a moment before he spoke

"Have you got your dad's gun under your coat, Tuck?" he asked, a little sternly.

"I didn't mean to disobey you, grandad," Tuck apologized. "I was just practicing like old Luke showed me. Throwing down on things and pointing my finger. You remember, Luke said you don't need bullets if you practice right."

Fred Belmont's eyes softened a little as Tuck unbuttoned his jacket and drew out the only keepsake the boy had of his father. It was an old .44.

"That's your gun when you're older, Tuck," the old man said. "But as long as there's no ammunition for it, I'd rather

you wouldn't tote it."

They left Tuck, handling his father's gun tenderly. He gave it a few brisk rubs with a cloth that he drew from a levi pocket. He placed it gently on the table before he poked up the fire in preparation for his noonday meal. Outside, he heard the rattle of grandad's buckboard and the heavy pound of Sheriff Henderson's big stallion, as they headed toward Concho.

WHEN FRED BELMONT, with the sheriff, rode into Concho, there was no mistaking the tension that held the hundreds of people who crowded the town's one long street.

Ace Reynolds was in jail. That was the main topic in the saloons and among the groups of men who stood ankle-deep in the dust of Fort Street, or blocked the plank walks on either side.

Ace Reynolds had grown rapidly from an unknown gambler, with uncanny luck, to the owner of Concho's largest gambling hall. From there, he reached out for cattle and the fertile range land that surrounded the growing settlement.

Feared by most inhabitants for the speed of his gun hand, his power grew steadily. Those who crossed him or attempted to call his hand in a legal way, eventually met a violent and mysterious death.

All eyes turned toward Fred Belmont as he alighted from his rig before the courthouse. His eyes swept over the faces of those who stood about the entrance and in the corridor adjacent to Judge Brigg's court room. Some eyes that he met were friendly, commanding him silently for his courage. Other eyes were cold and deadly. They knew, like the rest, that Fred Belmont would give his testimony straight.

On the stand, the old rancher gave his testimony in few words: "I saw Ace Reynolds ride away from Mason's place," he told the jury. "I smelled powder smoke, so I decided to stop. Mason was drawing his last breath when I got to him. All he said, was, 'Reynolds didn't give me a chance. I was unarmed when he shot me.'"

There was a jumble of voices in the crowded court room when the jury left to deliberate, but nothing to compare with

the confusion thirty minutes later, when the foreman announced a verdict of guilty.

Fred Belmont's features had hardly changed. When he came through the crowds at the south end of Fort Street, he acknowledged the cheering words of various ranchers, and many slaps on the shoulders from businessmen who had suffered under Reynolds' rule.

He could not shake off a feeling that Reynolds had still to play his crooked hand. The big gambler had seemed too sure of himself in court. Even when the jury had reached their verdict and Judge Briggs had condemned him, Reynolds' expression was still one of defiance, his thin lips curved in a familiar sneer.

Henderson was reassuring: "Don't worry, Fred. He'll swing, an' today's the beginning of the clean-up in Sun Valley. In five days there won't be a skunk left."

"I hope so."

Fred Belmont had made his final purchase at the store and was about to start for home, when a series of shots rang out and the shouts of excited men came to him from the vicinity of Concho's stage station.

In a moment, the north end of town became obscured in a mass of dust. Mounted men darted out in all directions. Two riders came out of the swirling cloud and passed Belmont and his rig, riding hard and firing behind them. Fred Belmont's worst fear was confirmed when two of Henderson's men appeared in pursuit, guns blazing.

Belmont waited long enough to hear the details from another of Henderson's deputies, who rode up to the trading post to organize more possemen.

"It was Lobo Kane," the deputy shouted. "He was drivin' the Winslow stage himself when it pulled into the station, and right beside the stage for Yuma where Ace Reynolds sat, all handcuffed and ready to go. By the time somebody spotted Lobo Kane on the driver's seat, it was too late, because eight of Lobo's killers poured out of that stage with guns smokin' and all hell broke loose. I don't know how many are killed yet, but I do know Ace Reynolds and Lobo Kane are on the loose again!"

Fred Belmont got up finally into the seat of his buckboard and headed his horses away from Concho. His spirit had sunken in the last few moments, but he hurried his horses a little as his thoughts drifted to the home ranch and his grandson, Tuck.

The sun was melting on the peaks of the Hulpai Mountains as he turned into the narrow dirt road that led to his own property. He looked across the foothills and saw faint clouds of dust, rising from several directions, in the south and in the east. That sign, he knew, would be from the hard-riding desperados and the lawmen who were close on their heels.

As he entered his ranch yard, he looked again toward the high mountain peaks and the fading sun. "Darkness won't help my feelings none," he muttered, as he pulled up before his cabin.

He lifted a sack of beans from the rear of the rig, and started for the cabin. He thought of his grandson as he kicked open the door, taking note that Tuck's horse was not in the side corral.

AS THE HEAVY log door swung inward, throwing the sun's dying rays across the cabin floor, Fred Belmont suddenly realized his blunder. With his first step over the door jamb, the click of gun hammers and two shadowy figures springing from either wall sent a violent chill down his spine.

"You're next on my list, you old fool!" the voice of Ace Reynolds rasped. "Throw up your hands!"

The sack of beans crashed open at Belmont's feet. As he lifted his gnarled hands, the other gunman closed the heavy door and lit a candle and Belmont recognized the gaunt, evil features of Lobo Kane.

Reynolds stepped closer to the aged rancher. "I'm going to kill you, Belmont," he grated. "But I don't want you to die fast." Swinging backhanded, he struck the old man across the face with his left hand. The steel handcuff with its broken, dangling chain brought blood to Belmont's leathery face. "Lift the old coot's gun, Lobo," Reynolds ordered. "He might grab for it when I start clubbing his brains out."

Kane had made a step to obey Reynolds, when the creak of the rear door and a shrill voice startled them.

"Drop your guns!" Tuck Belmont commanded, standing spread-legged in the entrance like a seasoned gun-fighter.

Grandfather Belmont's jaw sagged at the sight of Tuck and the old gun held steady in his small fist. Lobo Kane had lowered his gun at the boy's fierce command, but to quick-thinking Ace Reynolds that small figure behind a heavy .44 seemed part of a kid's game. Swiftly his gun swung into line.

Then, somehow, miraculously, the .44 in the kid's hand spoke like a cannon—and Ace Reynolds, gambler, stared wildly at his shattered gun-hand.

Before the echo of Tuck's shot died, Fred Belmont went into action. He sent a bullet through the shoulder of Lobo Kane, then spun and slammed its brother into Reynold's right knee-cap. The gunmen hit the floor with a single crash. Old Belmont thought swiftly during the next moment. He pulled a rope from its place on the wall. "We'll tie up these skunks."

Reynolds and Lobo Kane were securely roped before Belmont looked again toward his grandson. Tuck had broken open his father's gun, removed the single, fired shell and gone about the business of cleaning the barrel.

Finally, his blue eyes looked up into his grandfather's face. "I never did tell you, grandad," he said. "But there was one bullet left in dad's belt, when they brought him home that night. I've kept it ever since."

Belmont was silent for some moments. He put an arm about Tuck's shoulder. "I think you put that bullet in the right place, Tuck. In fact, you used it on your father's murderer."

Fred Belmont sat down wearily, as the sounds of many horsemen grew louder, and painful groans escaped the reviving gunmen. "That'll be one of the posses," he muttered. "They won't have to look any further for Reynolds or Lobo Kane."

Then to Tuck, in a firmer voice, the old man added, "Remind me to get some .44 shells the nexttime we're in town."

CRAZY-MOON GUNS

They were hammering up a gallows in back of the *jusgado*—and Henderson sat grimly in his cell, listening, wondering if he'd live long enough to hang....

CLUNY PRICE PUSHED THE needle-sharp end of the broken billiard cue a little harder into Frank McClosky's shirt. The splinter of the cue was four feet long and its wood was as hard as Cluny's voice was soft.

"I can stick around three feet of this into your guts, Frank," Cluny observed gently. "I can do that while you're reachin' around into your pants for your gun. Want to try it out?"

Big Frank McClosky pulled back from the cue end. His broad hips were squarely against the end of the pool table and his right hand, half hidden by the skirt of his coat, paused in its rearward movement. Cluny Price lazed in the high chair against the wall. His blue eyes were mild but the long, strong hand that held the wooden rapier was firm and unshaking.

"You . . .!" stuttered Frank McClosky. "Yeah, me!" observed Mr. Price. "There's enough trouble in Buckskin, Frank, without your killin' Dave. Besides, I'm going to need Dave to take some cattle into Kansas City for me. Leave it lay, Frank!"

Still in that quiet voice,

Frank McClosky brought his hand out from under his coat. There was that in the steady pressure of the billiard cue, in Cluny's easy nonchalance, and in his hard blue eyes, that told McClosky that prudence was the better part of valor. Now, his face red with anger, he tried to dissemble his wrath.



A GOLDEN SADDLE CLASSIC

▼
by
BENNETT
FOSTER
▲

ACTION STORIES' HALL OF FAME

"No cause for trouble, Cluny," he said, hiding his rage as well as he could. "I ain't used to bein' jabbed behind though when I'm lookin' the other way. It made me mad for a minute." He laughed as he finished the words, the sound hollow and without meaning.

Cluny eased the pressure of the cue, his eyes still holding McClosky's.

Around the pool table the tableau broke. Men who had held their breath and remained fixed in place, eased their positions; and Dave Prentice, his face white beneath its normal healthy tan, stepped back and reached behind him to rack his cue. For a moment young Prentice had been very close to death there, and the chill of it was still in him.

Cluny Price spoke again, toying with the broken cue, one calloused finger feeling the needle-sharp point. "I won't jab you again, Frank," he promised. "No. I won't jab you no more."

There was a trace of accent on the word "jab." Just a trace of accent, and yet that soft spoken promise was a threat. Every man within sound of Price's softly drawing voice knew that Cluny would keep his word. He would not stick Frank McClosky with a billiard cue, not ever again. He would, however, kill Frank McClosky in his tracks should the occasion arise.

McClosky, now that he was no longer pinned against the table by the wooden skewer, managed to smile. Dissembling was an art with Frank McClosky. He had lived a long time by it and by a cruel, shrewd cunning. Now he brought both to bear.

"Forget it, Cluny," he said. "Forget it. I just lose my temper too easy, an' with things the way they are I reckon I fly off the handle too quick. If you boys will come over to my place, I'll buy a drink." He turned as he finished the words, encompassing the five or six men in the Palace with his smile.

The right corner of Cluny's lip curled up thinly. His eyes caught and held those of young Dave Prentice. He shook his head gently while he drawled in soft approbation.

"That'll be fine, Frank," drawled Cluny Price. "We'll sure go you."

He slid down from his chair. As he moved, Frank McClosky started for the door of the Palace, the others trooping after. Dave Prentice came around the end of the table and joined Cluny.

"You goin' to drink with that . . .?" Dave's voice was almost a whisper, tuned to Cluny's ears alone.

Cluny's thin grin widened. "I never," he said, loud enough so that the men ahead could hear, "refuse a drink, Dave. That's a motto of mine. Come on."

As a dissembler Cluny Price was no small potatoes himself.

THE little crowd left the Palace and trooped across the street. McClosky's Exchange Saloon was almost opposite the Palace Pool Hall. It was rumored that McClosky owned both places, a rumor that Bert Harvey, who ran the Palace, never bothered to deny. Inside the Exchange McClosky slipped behind the bar. Sad Sam Willis, McClosky's bartender, slid out glasses; and McClosky brought out his private bottle from a cupboard below the back bar.

"Drink hearty, boys," he boomed as he set the bottle on the bar top. "It ain't every day that you'll get whisky like that."

Cluny, at the end of the line, poured a bare inch of whisky into his glass. He watched while Prentice poured a modest drink and the two waited until the bottle had gone the rounds. When the drinks were poured Cluny lifted his glass.

"Here's to a better understandin', Frank," he said, and drank.

When the whisky was down Cluny spoke again. "I reckon I better push along now," he observed. "It's 'most twelve an' you know how Aunt Pelora is about bein' on time for meals. Comin', Dave?"

Dave Prentice set his glass on the bar top. Cluny nodded to the men at the bar and the two made for the door. At the door Cluny paused and looked back. McClosky was behind the bar, staring at him. As Cluny caught the saloon man's eyes McClosky exposed his teeth in a grin. Cluny's lips twitched and he stepped through the door into the street.

Walking down the street, Dave Prentice taking two short steps to Cluny's one

long stride, the tall cattle buyer spoke softly to his young companion.

"Don't never play pool with Frank no more, Dave," he warned. "Don't play pool with him or get around him. I reckon I better send you out of town. Why I don't know, but Frank aimed to kill you back there in the Palace."

Dave Prentice, his brown eyes filled with doglike devotion, looked up at his tall companion. "Gosh, Cluny," he began, "I don't know what to say. I ain't no match for Frank, but if he'd of gone much further I'd of had to go for my gun. A man cain't just stand back an' let another-fello' cuss him. Frank was gettin' pretty raw. He—"

"I heard it all," interrupted Cluny. "That's just what he wanted you to do, Dave. Frank's a killer. He's dropped three men that you an' me know of. It's been self defense every time. That's the difference between a killer an' any other kind of fello', Dave. The killer knows what he's goin' to do all the time. You'd never of got your gun out."

Dave Prentice frowned at the words. "I ain't so sure," he argued. "I'm pretty fair with a gun myself, Cluny. I shot—"

"Tim cans an' rabbits an' prairie dogs," drawled Cluny Price. "You wouldn't of had a chance. Don't go harborin' no delusions of grandeur, Dave. That's what's the trouble with Frank McClosky. That an' somethin' else. Here we are. Don't do no talkin' in front of Aunt Pelora now. She's upset about George bad enough without worryin' about you an' me."

They had paused before a single-story frame dwelling, and Cluny now led the way to the door. As he opened it the savory odor of cooked food struck their nostrils. They went down a narrow hall, into a bedroom, and there divested themselves of their hats, washed, and hurriedly ran combs through their hair. Clean and ready, they crossed the hall to a dining-room.

The long table in the room was set. As the two entered, a little birdlike woman, neat and crisp in fresh gingham, came from the kitchen bearing a big platter of steak. She put the steak on the table, straightened, and nodded toward chairs.

"If you'd of been a minute later, Cluny Price," she shrilled, "I'd of throwed that steak away."

Cluny grinned, pulling back a chair. "Smells too good to throw away, Aunt Pelora," he complimented. "Dave an' me hurried as fast as we could."

"Sure did," said young Prentice.

Aunt Pelora Whipple—and she was "Aunt Pelora" to half the town—sniffed audibly. She adjusted her glasses, hiding her pleasure with a shrill tongue that rasped more words. Aunt Pelora thought as much of Cluny Price as she might of a son, but she never let Cluny suspect her fondness.

"You hurried!" she said scornfully. "You was drinkin' down at Frank McClosky's saloon, that's what you was doin'. I smelled it on you when you come in."

Cluny hung his head. He had a lot of fun living at Aunt Pelora's, Cluny did, and acting like a chided boy was part of the fun. Abashed by that hanging head, Aunt Pelora weakened.

"I baked this mornin'," she announced. "Pie . . ." She paused a moment waiting for the announcement to take effect. Cluny did not raise his head and Aunt Pelora went on: "I never baked a better batch if I do say so. Mr. Whipple always used to say that my choc'late pie was the best he ever ate. He was right fond of it. As fond as George—"

She paused suddenly. Moisture gathered behind her glasses and she lifted them to wipe her eyes defiantly. Cluny had lifted his head quickly. Seeing the moisture he came out of his chair and in one long stride had reached Aunt Pelora's side. His long right arm went around her.

"No, Aunt Pelora," chided Cluny gently. "Ain't I told you?"

Aunt Pelora sniffed back her tears. "I know you've told me, Cluny," she said. "I know I'm an old fool, but when it's your own dead sister's boy, you can't help—" She broke away from the shelter of Cluny's arm and hastened back into the kitchen. The door closed behind her.

Cluny Price returned to his chair, stared blankly at the half-finished piece of steak on his plate.

"Hell!" he said slowly.

DAVE PRENTICE put down his knife and fork. He pushed back his chair a little as though his appetite was gone, and stared across the table at Cluny. When he spoke his voice was soft, pitched so that it would not carry beyond the closed kitchen door.

"Ain't there no way out, Cluny?" he asked softly. "Ain't there nothin' we can do?"

Cluny shook his head. "It don't look like it, Dave," he said slowly. "We been to the governor an' we went as far through the courts as we could. It don't look like there's no way out. You know as well as I do. You was there!" The last words were bitter.

Dave Prentice nodded. "I know, Cluny," he said miserably. "I know just how you feel. It's a mystery to me why you stand up for me like you do, after me testifyin' an' all."

"You just told the truth, kid," interrupted Cluny. "You didn't know that you was hangin' George. After all it was his horse you saw, an' you never said you could identify the rider."

"But to see George hang!" Dave Prentice shuddered. "I don't reckon I could stand that, Cluny."

Cluny Price shook his head. "You'll be out of town, kid," he said dully. "I'm goin' to buy George's cows an' I'll ship 'em. I'm goin' to send you with the shipment."

Dave Prentice was not to be sidetracked, however. His voice was flat as he spoke.

"I'd been down below the ranch an' I was comin' home," he said as one repeating an often-told tale. "I saw the lights in Wick's cabin an' I turned. Just as I come to the corral I heard a shot an' then two more. I spurred around the house but I wasn't in time to see nobody come out. I heard a horse leavin' in a hurry an' then, when the moon come out from behind a cloud, I seen the horse over across the draw. The rider had throwed himself down on the far side, ridin' like an Injun, an' I couldn't see him. But I knew the horse. It was—"

"It was George Henderson's big bay

that he calls Headlight," said Cluny wearily. "We been all over that time an' again, Dave. I've heard it in court an' I've heard it private. I can tell you the whole story. You dropped off your horse an' run in the house. Wick was on the floor dead an' with three holes in him. You run out of the house an' started after the killer but he was gone. You come on to town an' got Art Squires an' you went back out. That's all you know. You could identify the horse but not the rider. After all you ain't so important, Dave. It was Frank McClosky's testimony about George an' Wick havin' a fight in his place, and the three thirty-eight holes in Wick, an' the fact that George is a fancy rider an' could do that Injun stuff, that done the trick. That's what'll hang George if they do hang him."

"If they do hang him? What do you mean?" Dave Prentice was leaning forward eagerly. "Cluny, you don't think that George has still got a chance—?"

"There's always a chance," snapped Cluny Price. "Shut up, Dave! Here comes Aunt Pelora."

The kitchen door opened and Aunt Pelora Whipple came in carrying two plates. On each reposed a segment of chocolate pie, dark brown below the creamy white top. The little old lady had composed herself. Her eyes were red rimmed but she bore herself bravely.

She put the pie before Dave and came around the table. "Here," she said, placing Cluny's pie on the table, "here's your pie, Cluny. Do you think you could take a piece down to George this afternoon?"

As she put down the pie she leaned against Cluny's left side. Her hip was against Cluny's shoulder and she broke off her words to straighten suddenly. The fate of George Henderson was forgotten for the moment as she glared down at her star boarder.

"Why, Cluny Price," shrilled Aunt Pelora, "you got a gun on under your coat. What do you mean by that?"

Cluny, for the moment was taken aback. Then he raised mild blue eyes, grinning.

"That pie sure looks swell, Aunt Pelora," said Cluny. "Do you reckon I could have another piece when I finish this one?"

C LUNY took a whole pie down to the jail. He had some trouble side-tracking Aunt Pelora from the gun under his arm, but he finally accomplished that feat. When he reached the jail he heard a sound of hammering coming from the rear, and he grimaced. They were building a scaffold back there.

The jailor let Cluny go down to Henderson's cell, watching alertly while the pie was passed in. Henderson was a tall young fellow, gray-faced now with waiting behind bars. He had been in jail for almost a year while his case had toiled through the circuit court and on to the Appellate and Supreme courts. George Henderson had about given up hope. The date of his execution was just a week away.

He was plainly glad to see Cluny. After the pie had been passed in and the jailor had gone back to the end of the corridor, Cluny seated himself on a backless chair outside the cell.

"George," he said slowly, "I don't want to talk about this no more than you do, but I reckon I got to. Have you made a will?"

Henderson nodded. "I left what I got to Aunt Pelora," he said simply. "We might as well talk it out, Cluny. It's goin' to happen."

Cluny nodded. "Are you goin' to sell me your cows, George?" he asked. "You got about a carload left."

Henderson laughed bitterly. "That's all the law has left me, Cluny," he said. "That and a week to live. I suppose I might as well let you have 'em."

Again Cluny nodded. "That's that, then," he said. "I'll get the bill-of-sale fixed up. Now I want to ask you somethin'. Is there any reason that you can think of why Frank McClosky would want to kill Dave Prentice? Think hard now, George."

Henderson's face was sober. He was silent for some time and then he shook his head. "I can't think of any reason, Cluny," he said slowly. "Why did you ask that?"

"Damn' if I know," answered Cluny. "Frank does want to kill him though. He was set to do it this mornin'."

Again silence fell between the two men.

Presently Cluny spoke again. "George," he said, "I got a fool idea. Don't go off half-cocked now. You never had any trouble with Frank McClosky, did you?"

Henderson shook his head.

"An' Frank McClosky didn't profit a penny from Wick Graham's bein' killed," mused Cluny. "Shirt-tail Wilson got all of Wick's property. Shirt-tail was Wick's nephew."

"Are you trying to pin something on Frank?" asked Henderson. "I don't think you can do it, Cluny. Frank and Shirt-tail were together when Wick was killed. That come out in my trial. Frank has been mighty decent to me, Cluny. He's been down every day and he hasn't let me lack a thing." Henderson paused a moment and then continued swiftly: "Not that you other boys have let me down, Cluny."

"Every day, huh?" drawled Cluny. "George, there's one more question I want to ask you. You done a lot of fancy ridin' in your time. Suppose you wanted to hang onto the side of a horse: How would you do it?"

Henderson's voice was bitter. "That's rubbin' it in, Cluny," he returned. "You—"

Cluny held up a detaining hand. "I told you not to fly off, George," he drawled. "I really want to know."

Henderson subsided. "Why," he said, "if you really want to know, Cluny, there's two or three ways of doin' it. You can hold the horn with your right hand and drop over; or if you want to be fancy about it, there's ways of hookin' a spur an' swingin' clear down. I could show you better than I can tell you."

"How do you do it, George?"

Henderson frowned. "Why," he said, "I can do it any way, almost. Generally I go down and hook a spur on the cantle and reach up with my right hand for the mane. That's generally what I do."

Cluny nodded absently. His mind had taken another track. "Frank's been down every day, huh?" he asked again. I reckon you talked your case over with him some."

"Of course," Henderson had risen from the stool on which he sat. "I've talked to Frank. Frank has been a good friend to me."

Cluny got up. "Don't eat all that pie

at once," he warned, breaking the subject abruptly. "I'll be around about those cows. See you tomorrow."

OUTSIDE the jail Cluny Price paused. Then, hearing the hammer blows, he strolled around behind the little building. Between the courthouse and the back of the jail a scaffold was in the process of erection. As Cluny approached, the short dumpy figure of Art Squires came from the scaffold. The two, cattle-buyer and sheriff, met. Squires was a broad man, and he was forced to look up at Cluny.

"Pretty near built, Art," observed Cluny, nodding toward the scaffold.

"Pretty near," answered Squires, his face serious.

"Kind of hard on George," observed Cluny, "hearin' all that racket and knowin' what it is."

"Kind of hard," agreed Squires. "Say, Cluny—"

"Well?"

"Election's comin'," continued Squires. "You know, I been wonderin', Cluny—"

"Wonderin' what?"

Squires pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to the tall man. Cluny unfolded the paper and read:

You are invited to attend the hanging of George Henderson at noon, twelve P. M., September the sixteenth. Said hanging to be conducted by our popular Sheriff Art Squires, who will be a candidate for re-election at the next election.

R. S. V. P.

"I got it out of a ettiket book, Cluny," Squire's voice was anxious. "I thought I'd have about five hundred printed an' send 'em out. Do you think that would be all right with George?"

Cluny gravely refolded the piece of paper and handed it back to the red-faced sheriff. "I don't think I'd have it done right away, Art," he said solemnly. "Somethin' might come up. The idea's good, though."

Squires took the paper and mopped his florid face. "Thanks, Cluny," he said. "You bein' such a good friend of George's I thought I'd ask. I'll be wantin' to get

'em out pretty soon though."

"In a few days, Art," returned Cluny. "I'll be seein' you . . ."

From the jail and courthouse Cluny went on his way. He talked to two or three men concerning cattle that they had for sale, helped make a dicker between two ranchmen who could not get together on a grass lease, took a drink with them when the deal was done. About six o'clock he wound up his wanderings at Buckskin's little depot.

Buckskin was on a branch line. A train came in three times a week, making a snap job for the crochety little station-master, Bob Grundy. Cluny drifted into the depot and engaged Grundy in artless conversation.

Grundy adjusted his steel-rimmed spectacles, indicated a chair in front of the typewriter. The machine was one of the first models and one of Grundy's most prized possessions. There were separate keys for the small letters, the capitals and the figures. Grundy could not operate the machine rapidly enough to take messages on it, but he always copied the telegrams he received after having first written them in long-hand.

Cluny was chewing a match as he talked to Grundy. When he went out of the depot he paused by the door and stuck the match in the lock.

CLUNY PRICE was late for supper, a fact noted and commented on by Aunt Pelora. When he had finished the meal he nodded to Dave Prentice and that young man followed him out into the hall. Aunt Pelora had several men who ate supper at her table and these did not note Cluny's departure. In the hall Cluny asked a question:

"Dave," he said, "when we talked today you went over what you told in court. Now I want to ask you somethin'. I want you to think hard. When you saw this horse leavin' Wick's, did you see how the rider was holdin' to the saddle?"

Dave furrowed his brow. He was silent for some time and then he shook his head. "No," he answered. "It was just moonlight an' I couldn't see that good. Once in a while I could see the top of his

hat come up over the horse's neck, but that was all."

Cluny, too, was silent. Then he nodded and took a fresh track. "Dave," he said solemnly, "you know Grundy?"

Dave grunted scornfully. Everyone in Buckskin knew Grundy.

Cluny was thoughtful. "You go get Grundy and buy him a drink," he said. "Buy him two or three drinks. Grundy never refuses free liquor. You go get him."

Dave demurred. He had an engagement for the evening it appeared, but Cluny carried his point. Presently the grumbling Dave left on his mission and Cluny sat down, rolled a cigarette and waited.

Half an hour after Dave's departure he left Aunt Pelora's and went to the depot. The station was dark and the door was locked. Someone had found and removed the match. Sighing over wasted effort Cluny took his heavy-bladed stockman's knife and worked at a window. He got the window open and went in.

Cluny lit a lamp, found telegraph blanks and a file of old messages which he carried to the typewriter. After some study of the old messages he drafted a paragraph in longhand; then, by dint of much labor, using only one finger, he translated that paragraph to type. He put the telegraph blank into an envelope, blew out the light and departed via the window, closing it after him.

Up town Cluny went to Frank McClosky's saloon. He was sure that he would find Art Squires there, just as he was sure that he would not find Dave and Grundy. Squires was at the bar, talking to McClosky, when Cluny entered the Exchange. Cluny went directly to the sheriff.

"I thought I'd find you here, Art," he said as he stopped. "I just come up from the depot an' Grundy asked me to bring you this."

Squires took the telegram, tore open the envelope and unfolded the yellow blank. When he had finished reading he slapped the square piece of paper down on the bar. "There!" he exclaimed. "The governor's granted George a stay of execution! And I had it all fixed up for the sixteenth, too, dang it!"

Cluny lifted mild eyebrows. Frank McClosky was reading the message with interest. "You better go down an' give George the good news, hadn't you, Art?" inquired Cluny.

Squires shrugged. "I reckon," he replied. "It's a ill wind that blows anybody some good, ain't it?" He picked up the false message and stumped out of the Exchange.

When Squires had gone Cluny turned to McClosky. "I'd like to talk to you a little, Frank," he said. "Where can we go?"

McClosky's eyes were bright. "Back in my office," he said. He came from behind the bar and led the way to the rear of the Exchange.

McCLOSKY'S office was in reality the back room of the saloon. There were cases of liquor, kegs of beer and whiskey set about the room. In one corner was a desk. McClosky lit the lamp on the desk and then went back to shut the door. Cluny seated himself on a beer-barrel and McClosky took a seat on a box.

"Go ahead, Cluny," he directed. "There ain't nobody will bother us."

Cluny took off his hat and revolved it in his hands. He looked at McClosky as though he did not know where to begin. Then he spoke suddenly: "I was down to see George this afternoon."

McClosky nodded. "I dropped in this evenin' an' George said he'd seen you."

Cluny had not expected this. If Henderson had talked to McClosky there was a chance that he had said too much. The thought made Cluny frown earnestly. Still he continued.

"You an' me are the best friends George has got," he said. "George told me how good you had been to him."

McClosky waved that aside. "I had to testify against George at the trial," he said. "Seemed like the least I could do was to be decent. I—"

"George don't think of that," interrupted Cluny hastily. "The thing is, you been a friend to him. This stay of execution is only temporary, Frank. I'm afraid it's that anyhow. Of course if new evidence come up—"

"What new evidence could come up?" McClosky leaned forward eagerly.

Cluny shrugged. "Oh, I dunno," he said vaguely. "Dave was talkin' today. . . . Anyhow, Frank, the chances are that this just puts it off a little."

"What did Dave say?" Was that anxiety in McClosky's voice?

"He was just talkin' about ridin'," Cluny was apologetic. "You know. Up at the Palace. Seems like there's somethin' Dave didn't bring out at the trial. Just some little thing. It don't matter. It won't make no difference."

McClosky's eyes were narrow. "Was that what you wanted to tell me?" he asked smoothly.

Cluny shook his head. "No," he replied decisively. "Frank, just how far would you go to see George out of this?"

Behind McClosky's fat face his brain was working busily. He leaned toward Cluny. "I'd go a long ways," he stated. "What you got on your mind, Cluny?"

"Just this." Cluny, too, leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Why don't you an' me take him out of there, Frank? We could get him away an' into Mexico. Then he'd be safe."

"How would we do it?"

"Easy," Cluny almost whispered. "You an' me can get in to see him anytime, can't we? Suppose that one of us was to be in the corridor—me, say. The other one comes an' calls Tom Fowler, the jailor, up front. You'd do that. Then I'd slip George a gun. He could bat me over the head an' I'd go down. You fellows would come runnin'. George would stand you up with the gun an' make Tom unlock the cell. He'd get out an' beat it. We'd have a horse outside an' he'd line out. I'd be hurt, an' you an' Tom would be so busy lookin' after me that you'd be late givin' an alarm. You ought to be able to get in Tom's way a-plenty."

McClosky's eyes were gleaming slits. He nodded slowly. "It might work," he said, after some thought. "We'd have to have another man, though; one to get George to his horse. Shirt-tail could do that. He owes me plenty!"

Cluny could almost see McClosky's brain working. He could almost interpret the

thoughts going through it. "Of course," said Cluny Price, "if you don't want to take the chance, Frank, we can wait an' see what caused this stay of execution. Maybe there's a chance of George comin' free. Dave said—" He broke off.

McClosky was suddenly decisive. "Tonight," he announced. "That's the time. We could go down to talk to George about this stay of execution. I'll get hold of Shirt-tail."

"You sure he's all right?" Cluny was cautious. "He's Wick Graham's nephew."

"By hell, he's got to be all right! What time, Cluny?"

Cluny thought swiftly. "The later the better," he said. "We could make it about eleven."

"Eleven sharp, then!" snapped McClosky. "I'll see Shirt-tail an' look after the horse. This has got to be right, Cluny."

Mentally Cluny was praying that it would be all right. That his reasoning was not false. "I'll go down to the jail at five minutes to eleven," he said. "You an' Shirt-tail get there at eleven. This is white of you, Frank. I don't know—"

McClosky held out a broad hand. "Forget it!" he rumbled. "I like George the same as you do. I'll be there."

Cluny got up. "At eleven," he repeated. "Tom won't let us in much after that."

McClosky, too, was on his feet. "Eleven," he agreed. "I'll have to stir around now an' get Wilson an' the horse. I'll be there, Cluny."

There was no need of further conversation. McClosky let Cluny out of the back door. When the tall cattle buyer was gone the saloon man returned to the desk. He sat there for some minutes, staring at the flickering lamp. Then he grinned.

"I'll be there," said Frank McClosky to himself. "You bet I'll be there!" He pulled a heavy, short-barreled gun from his pocket holster and examined the cylinder.

CLUNY, having left the rear of the Exchange, sought to find Dave Prentice. Prentice was not at the other saloon nor was he on the street. Cluny finally ran Dave to earth at Aunt Pelora Whipple's. Dave was in the room that he and Cluny shared, getting ready for bed. It

was almost ten-thirty.

Cluny wasted few minutes in explaining his mission. He did not notice that the hall door had not closed behind him, nor did he hear feet in the corridor. He commanded Dave to get dressed. Dave was sleepy and indignant. He had already, as he considered, wasted his evening and was in no mood for further chasing around.

"What do I want to go to the jail for?" demanded Dave, when Cluny had given his orders. "I already spent half the night with Grundy an' that's a plenty!"

He yawned widely.

Cluny's square jaw set as he snapped orders. "I ain't got time to tell you why I want you there," he barked. "You be there, that's all. You be there an' you be heeled. Damn it, Dave, this is for George!"

Dave ceased his expostulations then and began to put on his clothes. Cluny, starting toward the door, threw one more admonition over his shoulder: "Eleven o'clock," he said. "Don't come a minute later than that, an' if you run into Art Squires bring him along."

From Aunt Pelora's Cluny went directly to the jail. He had spent precious minutes convincing Dave Prentice, and he had to hurry. He did not see the figure that issued from the house when he had left. If he had, Cluny would have turned and gone back. There was something menacing and stealthy in the way that bent figure slipped along in the dark. And once, passing a lighted window hurriedly, the shadow of a long barreled gun shown plainly with the shadow of Cluny's follower . . .

When Dave Prentice was dressed he left the house at a run. He made toward the square.

There was little life on the square, and a glance at the time showed Dave that it was ten minutes until eleven. He looked in at the Exchange, saw only a few night owls at the bar, and then ran to the Palace Pool Hall. Bert Harvey was closing up. The lights in Buckskin's other saloon were already out, and with a curse Dave turned and ran toward the jail. As he rounded the corner of the square he bumped into

a stocky, pudgy man.

Art Squires' petulant voice assailed him. "What the hell?" demanded the sheriff.

"Lookin' for you, Art," panted Dave. "I got to get in to see George Henderson right away. Will you take me down there?"

Squires grunted. "At this time of night?" he demanded, and then seeing that Dave was prepared to make a point of it, he gave way. "All right, all right. Don't argue about it. I'll go with you!"

Dave gasped thankfully. "That's fine Art," he said. "Let's hurry, will you?"

IN the meantime Cluny Price, with all arrangements made, he hoped, had gone to the jail. He had reached the squat little building some ten minutes before the time set. There had followed an argument with Tom Fowler. The jailor had gone to bed and did not want to be disturbed. Cluny was so insistent, however, that Fowler finally gave in and came to the door, dressed in a night shirt and a pair of pants. He let Cluny into the jail, lit an extra lamp in the corridor.

George Henderson was still up. He came to the door of his cell when he heard Cluny's approach. Cluny looked at his watch. It lacked a few minutes of eleven. Fowler was just behind Cluny.

"I come about that telegram, George," said Cluny, meeting the question in Henderson's eyes. "I reckon I got to take the wind out of you, old man. I'm pretty sure that message is a fake." He was talking for time, trying to stall.

Henderson looked Cluny squarely in the eyes. Cluny's words had been a shock to him. The message that stayed his execution had been a new lease on life, had given him a little hope. "Why, Cluny—"

There was a rattling and banging on the jail door. Fowler reluctantly turned to answer the sound. When he had gone a few steps Cluny leaned forward and whispered fiercely:

"Get under your bunk an' stay there, George! Don't come out no matter what happens!"

Henderson was startled. He made no move to obey. Again came Cluny's whisper, fierce and insistent: "Damn it, man!

Get under your bunk. It's your life!"

Under the force of those driven words Henderson turned. He cast one startled look at Cluny Price, and then dropped down and crawled under the thick boards that formed the bottom of his cell bunk. Henderson had scarcely disappeared before Cluny yelled as if filled with terror, and dropped to the floor. Frank McClosky was in the corridor.

The big saloon keeper was coming on the run, his gross body moving with the deceptive, lumbering speed of a charging grizzly. Even in the faint light from the corridor lamp, Cluny could see the desperate sweat that beaded his heavy face. His breath was rasping, and the blued steel of a drawn revolver glinted in his swinging hand.

"Come on—!" he was shouting.

When McClosky reached Cluny he drew up short. He was staring into Henderson's apparently vacant cell. Cluny had rolled until he was looking up. His right hand was under his coat, reaching across his shirt. McClosky, his eyes slitted, jerked his glance from the apparently empty cell to the limp body of Cluny. Fowler, the jailer, was just behind the big saloon keeper.

"Crossed me!" roared McClosky, and dropped the muzzle of his gun toward Cluny Price. He meant murder. It shown on his face, in the tense finger that tightened on the trigger of the double-action in his hand. Tom Fowler leaped forward to stay the shot, but he was too late. From the floor two slugs roared up to tear into Frank McClosky, to wipe the rage from his face and supplant it with a queer look of curiosity. McClosky took a step back, buckled at the knees, and slid down against the wall opposite the cells.

Cluny Price got to his feet, his single action .45 sending up a faint trail of powder smoke. His face was white, but his eyes were blazing. "Outside!" he yelled at Fowler. "Wilson's out there. We got—"

Excited voices filled the corridor and the jail. Art Squires, Dave Prentice behind him, had charged through the door. Squires, his face scarlet with wrath, held a gun in his hand. He stopped just short of Tom Fowler, his gun leveled and cov-

ering Cluny.

"What in hell does this mean, Price?" roared the sheriff. "What's goin' on here?"

Fowler pointed a trembling finger at Cluny. "He killed Frank McClosky," shrilled the jailer. "Frank had a gun on him."

Cluny managed to check the sheriff. "Shirt-tail Wilson's outside," he snapped. "You got to get him! It means George's life, I tell you. Get him!"

He took a half step, moving toward Squires and the other two, his eyes fixed beyond them on the jail door. That half step was all he took. An expression of astonishment spread over his face and he leaned back against a cell. Following his gaze the others turned. They too, were amazed. Standing in the corridor of the jail, just inside the door, was a hangdog figure of a man—and behind him was a little gray-haired woman with a large and efficient shotgun in her hands.

Cluny was first to recover. "Aunt Pelora!" he exclaimed. "What in the world—?"

Aunt Pelora Whipple's voice was prim as she answered. "I heard you talkin' to Dave," she said. "I heard you tell him to be at the jail at eleven and to bring Mr. Squires. I thought if it concerned George it concerned me, so I took Mr. Whipple's shotgun and came along."

"But Shirt-tail—?" gasped Cluny. Where—?"

"I didn't do nothin'!" Shirt-tail Wilson shrilled. His loose lips quivered, and his eyes were frightful in his thin, weak face. He looked from man to man appealingly. "I just come down with Frank, like he told me to. I was only—"

"I found this man outside with a gun in his hand," interrupted Aunt Pelora. "I didn't think he had any business there so I made him come in." She sniffed and moved aside a little so that she had a view of the corridor. Her bright, bespectacled eyes fixed themselves expectantly on Tom Fowler. Under that stare Fowler shifted uneasily.

Aunt Pelora sniffed again. "I must say, Tom Fowler," she concluded, "that you keep your jail very untidy. It's no fit place to keep a prisoner."

THINGS followed rapidly after that. In the jail office, under stimulus of sharp questions from Cluny Price and Art Squires, Shirt-tail Wilson told a sorry tale. Wick Graham's nephew, and a worthless one, he had agreed with Frank McClosky to kill Graham and benefit by the murder. McClosky had made the plan and had done the actual killing, although Wilson had stolen Headlight, George Henderson's bay horse.

Things had then worked fortuitously for the pair. Dave Prentice, arriving on the scene, had recognized the horse. McClosky had dropped over the side, avoiding detection by hanging to the saddle-horn. Circumstantial evidence had built a case against Henderson. His ability as a fancy rider, his quarrel with Graham, the Headlight horse, and his inability to furnish an alibi, had all served to fix the crime on him. These things Wilson told, together with the fact that he had shared his uncle's estate with the dead saloon-keeper. When Wilson had told his story Squires locked him up.

"It worked out," said Cluny Price, "but gosh, I thought it wasn't goin' to. If Aunt Pelora hadn't of got Shirt-tail I'd been in a hell of a fix. I figured that if Frank knew that there was a chance of Henderson's comin' clear he'd be worried. George had been convicted and Frank wanted him hung an' the case all settled. He didn't want nobody to be diggin' into things. That's why I fixed up the fake telegram. Then I made this jail-break proposition to him. He done just what I thought he'd do. He figgered that he'd kill George attemptin' to escape, an' then he'd be a hero an' things would be settled to boot. He figgered that he'd get me too, or if he didn't that I'd always have to keep my mouth shut. He damn' near got away with it. I knew he'd have Shirt-tail outside in case things went wrong."

Squires looked quizzically at the speaker. "Suppose," he asked, "that Frank had been on the square though. Then what would you of done?"

Cluny grinned a flashing grin at the speaker. "Why," he said gently, "that would of been all right, too, Art. If Frank had been on the square we'd of gone

through with it, an' George would of got away."

For the moment Squires was silent. Dave Prentice asked a question. "What I want to know is what started you thinkin', Cluny?" he demanded.

Cluny eyed Prentice. "You did," he answered. "You was talkin' about fancy ridin' when you played pool with Frank. You told how George used to hang down and pick up handkerchiefs from the ground, an' you told how he done it. Right after that Frank started to pick a fuss with you. Remember?"

Prentice nodded. Squires got up. Aunt Pelora put her hand on George Henderson's arm, for George had been brought from his cell to hear this last and most recent evidence in his case.

"You'll be free tomorrow, Georgie," said Aunt Pelora. "You come up to the house and I'll bake you a pie."

George Henderson smiled down at the little woman beside him. Then his eyes caught and held those of Cluny Price. Henderson's lips moved but he made no sound. The light in his eyes was thanks enough for Cluny. The tall young cattle-buyer turned to the short red-faced sheriff. He winked a broad, long wink.

"This has all been irregular as hell, Art," he said apologetically. "I'm sorry if I put you out any."

Squires scowled at the tall man. "I ought to put you in jail, Cluny," he growled. "I ought to lock you up."

Cluny grinned. "You ought to but you won't, Art," he said. And then stepping close to the sheriff, "You're a damn' good fellow, Art, an' you'll be our next sheriff, but if I was you I'd tear up that invitation you wrote. Somebody might see it and get a laugh."

Squires flushed red. He reached in his pocket and under Cluny's amused eyes removed a folded piece of paper and tore it into small shreds. "You won't tell, will you, Cluny?" he whispered as he dropped the scraps.

Cluny gravely shook his head. "I won't tell, Art," he reassured him. Then lowering his voice still further: "It was a good idea, Art. Maybe you can get an invite out for Shirt-tail Wilson."

Great Gunswift Novelet



By
FRANK
CARL
YOUNG

Out of the distant, fear-haunted past came yellow-eyed Kee Nugent—carrying locked in his cruel, gunman's brain the secret that would explode Tall Bear Range into a powder-flame inferno, set friend against friend in a last-ditch battle with booothill for the loser and hang-rope for top-dog. . . .

BRIDE of the HANG-TREE HELLION

THE STRAY STEER WAS doomed the moment the fugitive gunman saw it. Middle-aged and strongly built, Kee Nugent was half frenzied with hunger. Two days beating his way up into Wyoming through the wilderness from the White River in Colorado had given him scant chance to rest or get food.

The stray steer in the grass ahead brought saliva to the corners of his cruel, dry mouth. For a moment his quick, evilish, brown eyes scanned the sweep of rolling range. There was only the deep ruts of wagon trail, brush, and a few trees. No other sign of active life. Just the lone, grazing steer. Meat—

His hand moved quickly. There was



A rifle cracked . . . Garth jerked with the impact of the slug . . .

the flash of the sun on his bared six-shooter. Gun upraised, his long-shanked, big-wheeled spurs gleamed as they raked the sides of his bay pony.

The fat steer pivoted as he charged. The bay quickly cut to the left to block it. There came the roar of the pistol, and the steer's knees folded and gouged into the grass, as death destroyed its brain.

Not distant stood a thin stand of choke cheery and green ash. Riding in among them, the T-shaped silver fasteners on his beaver-skin vest flashing, the ravenous fugitive gathered dry down branches, then returned to the dead steer and started a fire. A thin column of smoke cork-screwed up into the sky.

Taking a seven-inch bladed sheath knife from his battered saddle-bag, the gunman crouched down over the steer. The keen steel sliced through hide, into the warm flesh. And as the blood ran, Nugent's eyes gleamed and his cruel mouth watered.

With a green stick, he half roasted the steak. Impatiently. Restlessly. Unable to wait any longer, he suddenly grabbed the meat between both dirty hands and sank his teeth into it with animal-like gluttony.

Now and then he looked up, jaws grinding piggishly. He saw nothing alarming across the rippling sweep of range. He had several names, but he felt sure no one in this section of Wyoming would know them. It gave him a sense of security for the time being.

He turned back to his kill with satisfaction. Threads of only partially cooked blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. His fingers dripped with it, and his ugly brown eyes seemed to mirror it. It seemed like his trademark . . .

And then Nugent saw the distant funnel of dust rising in the east.

It was miles away. He could not see what lay under it. But it was *behind* him, somewhere parallel to his back trail. And that could mean anything.

He stood up, went to his bay pony. Not out of any feeling of fear. There wasn't a single man alive that he was afraid of. But caution and a certain sense of urgency drove him on to hurry.

Tightening his cinch, he flung himself into his sweaty Cheyenne saddle and took

the wagon-rutted trail in the direction of Pagosa Wells and Squaw Man Pass.

The distant cloud of dust could be a posse . . .

BENEATH the gray, rising dust labored a six-horse team dragging a heavy, jolting freight wagon. On the white-oak side-boards black, foot-high letters—HANNIBAL RYAN & SON, MILLBANK, WYOMING—stood out with brazen proclamation. From hooks on the axle tree, water bucket and tar-box swung in rhythm with the movements of the youthful teamster seated on the 'lazy-board'.

"What's that in the grass ahead, Garth?" called Joe Ryan, Hannibal's twenty-year-old son. "It's not a rock. The thing's got legs."

Garth Mitchum saw it about the same time. He nodded. Long before this he had noticed the thread of smoke in the sky. Lanky and flexible, he now rode his sorrel stud alertly to the left of the big Weber-built freight wagon.

Mid-afternoon sunlight gleamed from his silvered pistol plates. His bony knee kept rubbing his leather rifle boot with a squeaky, rhythmic sound. Caked with dust, the armpits of his shirt dark with sweat, Garth frowned and tongued his dry lips speculatively. A dead cow could mean many things. Even a raiding party of Poncas Indians, for there had been sign not many miles back.

He rode on more alertly than before. As armed guard, this was his last trip for HANNIBAL RYAN & SON, for he was anxious to get back to his little cattle spread along the Tall Bear creek. Nothing must happen to mar his three year record with Hannibal. For Hannibal was a big influence that could help him expand his little cow outfit.

"Look at that!" cried Joe. They had come near enough to the carcass to notice the butchered out portion.

"Better pull up, Joe," ordered Garth, dismounting. "There's something funny about this."

Young Ryan let out a yell, hauled back on the leather lines. Jumping from the lazy-board, he followed Garth through the

deep grass to the dead animal.

"One of Oley Myers, judging by the brand," said Joe. "Oley's outfit isn't far from here."

Garth nodded and stooped down. Flies buzzed about the raw, red cavity in the cow. He remained wordless, but his mind raced, gathering implications from what he saw.

"Looks like some hungry buck Indian jumped reservation and got himself a meal," was Joe's hasty conclusion.

Mounting resentment twisted Garth's sharp-boned features. The white-faced cow had been deliberately shot in the head. Size of the hole indicated a forty-five calibre. Twenty feet away were the gray ashes of a fire. He rubbed some of them between his fingers.

"Was a white man," Garth declared at last. "A hungry one." Pointing at the tracks, he went on, "Indian's don't ride shod ponies, wear boots, or leave so much cow behind. This gent couldn't have eaten all he sliced out, either, so he's still totin' some."

"Oley won't like it."

Garth straightened and shifted his cartridge belt and heavy six-shooter. He started back toward his horse, lips set, eyes narrowed.

"Only a pretty mean-brained white man could have done a thing like this," he said.

Hannibal Ryan's son rubbed thoughtfully at the fuzzy, dust-caked beginnings of his first mustache. "Then pony tracks seem to head our way—toward Pagosa Wells and the Pass."

Garth swung into his sweat-stained saddle. "I didn't miss them, Joe," he said. "I guess he'll be there."

Joe shot Garth an anxious glance. "You want it that way, don't you?"

Garth didn't answer right away. He was thinking of Oley's small log cabin, much like the one he had just finished building for himself along the Tall Bear. Oley had a sick wife and three kids, his hands full.

"Guess I do," he admitted. "A steer like that would bring Oley about twenty three dollars down in Abilene. Means a lot to a poor fellow like Oley."

Joe Ryan climbed back on the 'lazy-

board'. He knew how Garth felt. He and Garth had fought through several years of the State's war together. Some thought Garth too quick tempered, wild. Laura's father, for instance. But Joe had the benefit of lonely hours on picket duty with him, skirmish line battles, and six-months confinement together in a wretched Confederate prison. You know the best in a man after that—and the worst.

"We better get on up the road," said Garth. "Hannibal expected this load in yesterday, and I've got plenty of branding to do."

"We would have been in, but you just had to have one of them fancy cradles from St. Louis, you said," jibed Joe.

"Wasn't my fault the train didn't get in on time."

"Maybe not, but whoever heard of a single man fetching himself a cradle home?"

Garth's blue eyes mellowed. "I don't mean to be single forever, Joe. You know that."

Joe frowned and shook his head. "Ironhead Harlan Davis is a pretty set man, Garth," he pointed out. "If you try to marry Laura without his permission, he'll fence your little spread in and starve you out, bust you right back to nothing again. He said he would, and Ironhead always does what he says."

Garth frowned. Laura's father was very hard to deal with. Ever since losing a baby son many years ago, he had been bitter and sour, ruthless with his power, selfish in demanding that kit and kin be obedient to his opinion and desire.

"Soon somebody is going to have to teach Ironhead how to be human," he said, touching the sorrel with the spurs and swinging over on the left wing.

"Just so long as you don't try it," warned Joe. "That would finish our chances of ranching along the Tall Bear."

Joe let out a wild cry, and the teams lurched into their collars. The big freight wagon jolted forward again. Dust began to worm its way up into the sky again.

As they swung past the dead cow, Garth again tried to picture the kind of desperate, animal-minded man who had done it. He felt reasonably sure they'd meet at

Pagosa Wells. For John Radnor's bar and kitchen there were widely known, and it was a focal point for all travelers within the region, as well as a stagecoach stop.

Garth hoped they'd meet—for Oley's sake.

THHEY REACHED Pagosa Wells at four o'clock in the afternoon. The only habitation for miles around, John Radnor's place lay in a small hollow at the foot of Squaw Man's Pass. Deep springs furnished ample water, and tall, black willows formed a cool, lacey-green enclosure around the two-story, galleried hotel, stables and sheds.

"Howdy, Garth!" called out Zeth Radnor, stable boss and brother of the owner. "Have a good trip?"

"So far. Anything decent in the kitchen this time?"

"Never was anything bad in it, you long-legged galoot!"

Flinging the sorrel's reins to Radnor, Garth swung down out of his saddle. While he slapped dust from his shirt and pants, young Ryan curved the six-horse team in under the willows near the stables. Radnor's fourteen year old nephew, Skip, ran out, and Garth gave him a piece of sweet rock candy.

"Thanks, Garth. Gee, you always got something good with you."

The boy began working on the traces, then walked the horses into the yard and toward the oak water troughs.

"I could eat a bear raw, fur and teeth!" said Joe, as they peeled shirts to wash up in the pans on the bench along side of the wall of the blacksmith shop.

Drying his face, Garth looked across the yard toward the hitch-rack fronting the bar-section of the hotel. Half a dozen animals bearing almost as many brands stood there.

Later they entered a side-door that led into a small room adjoining the bar. Here were a few tables, coverless but clean. A few minutes later, Garth and young Ryan, the latter still bare-shouldered, were busy with knife, fork and steaming plates.

Garth sat facing the doorway leading into the smoke-filled barroom. Half a dozen or more men were lined along the

walnut bar, talking, drinking. He recognized most, but one, near the window end of the bar, was a stranger.

He was a tall man, hatless, about thirty-four or five, strongly built, with straight dark hair, parted on the side and short cropped. He wore long-shanked, big-wheeled spurs and a beaver-skin vest with T-shaped silver fasteners for buttons. A carved six-shooter was slung a little lower than most men's, the holster tip significantly tied down.

Garth thought of Oley's steer, and wondered . . .

The stranger sipped at his yellow whiskey glass and kept staring through the window, his broad back to the others. The freight wagon outside seemed to hold all of his attention. Especially the big black letters, HANNIBAL RYAN & SON, MILLBANK, WYOMING.

Into the stranger's ugly brown eyes came dancing lights of remembrance. Rubbing his thin mouth speculatively, he turned to look through the doorway into the dining room. For a moment his penetrating stare locked with Garth's. Then it moved to the broad back of young Ryan, who was busy forking food into his mouth.

The stranger continued to ponder, then suddenly turned his belly back to the bar-roll.

"How far is it to Millbank, Radnor?" he asked.

The florid featured tender of the bar, John Radnor, the owner, seemed nervous, unwilling to speak to this customer.

"Twenty miles from the other side of the Pass," he replied. "You aimin' to head there, Nugent?"

The stranger seemed to stiffen. His eyes narrowed maliciously, began to glitter.

"My name—where did you get it?" he demanded.

Radnor bit his lip, damning himself for his carelessness. His next impulse was to steal his fingers toward the sawed-off shot-gun under the bar. But he decided against it. He had heard too many stories concerning this hard-eyed man before him.

"You're not unknown here, Kee Nugent," he replied. "One of the boys here saw you once down in Black Butte City

after a shootin' fracas. I'd like it better if you finished your drink and pulled out."

Kee Nugent seemed to change from the relaxed observer of a few minutes before. Now he was tense, slow and cautious in movement. He turned to face the line of men fronting the bar.

"Which one of the boys?" came his monotonous voice.

Radnor hesitated to speak at all. "I've given you all the information I aim to, Kee."

Kee swung his cold stare toward the glasses and bottles lined along the back bar beneath the big mirror. It was an ornate mirror, obviously new.

"That's right pretty glassware," Kee reminded Radnor with menacing significance. "Be a mighty bad shame if it got smashed up, wouldn't it?"

Radnor flushed. A hush suddenly fastened itself upon the long barroom. Then, eyes on the gunman, one man after another began to backstep away from the long bar. Finally only one man was left. He was young, a rider for the *Slash C*. He stood with his hat shoved back, glass still in his hand, elbow cocked on the bar.

"I told him, Nugent," the *Slash C* youth admitted, a slight tone of appeasement in his voice. "What are you so hot about? Nothing serious to mentioning a man's name, is there—?"

It was the fastest thing anyone there had seen. Kee's hand blurred, his gun came up, roared. Glass tinkled as the whiskey glass in the young rider's hand vanished out of his bleeding fingers. An oath of pain came spitting from his lips—but he made no attempt to draw his own gun.

"Just to remind you that there might be something very serious in mentioning some names—especially mine!"

With his sharp words, Kee Nugent slowly sheathed his gun. His eyes darted challengingly at them all. No one said anything. Two men took the wounded rider outside. The rest glared silently at Kee with mixed anger and fear, then returned to their glasses, mumbling.

In the dining room, young Ryan and Garth exchanged glances. And by Garth's taut expression, Ryan sensed what was in

his mind.

Ryan spoke softly, almost soothingly. "Forget it, Garth. He's bad medicine. You got a little outfit of your own now—and a cradle to maybe fill someday."

Garth didn't reply. Within him seethed a fury that demanded his best to control. Leaving the table, he walked through the barroom. As he passed Nugent, he gave the gunman a challenging glance of condemnation. Then he went outside, crossed the yard to enter the stables and talk to Radnor's young nephew Skip.

"Where's the stranger's saddle and bags, Skip?"

JOE RYAN came to his feet, grabbed up his shirt. Using the side-door, he went outside to inspect the huge wheels on the big Weber wagon. A few minutes later, Kee Nugent's spurs jingled across the yard and the gunman stopped beside young Ryan, who was just dipping his tar-paddle into the tar-box. Nugent stared at the mole on Joe's bared shoulder blade.

"Who's your friend?" he asked.

Young Ryan started his eyes at Kee's dusty boot-toes, slowly raised them up the length of thick legs, beaver-skin vest and locked them challengingly with the deep, ugly brown eyes.

"Garth Mitchum."

"He wears that gun like he can use it."

"He can."

"Thought so. Seemed like he even hoped for a chance to draw when he passed me inside."

Joe dabbed tar around the axle. "He probably did, Mr. Nugent," he replied, with biting formality. "Move back, sir. I get damn careless with a tar-paddle—sometimes."

Nugent didn't miss the point. Taking a step back, he dug his fingers into the pocket of his beaver-skin vest. Curling a tobacco paper, he began building a cigarette while young Ryan moved to the next five-foot wheel.

"This Hannibal Ryan," Nugent said questioningly. "Is he a big sized man with a notch knifed out of his right ear?"

Young Ryan glanced up, quickly. "He's my father. You know him?"

"I might have—one time." The gunman

licked the edge of his querley, twisted it into the corner of his cruel mouth. "Is there also a Harlan Davis up around that way, too?"

"Sure is! Biggest rancher around Millbank range. He and my father came west together and settled there twenty years ago. Best friends on earth. Now is there anything else you want to know, Mr. Nugent?"

Joe's sarcasm brought a trace of a grin around Kee Nugent's mouth. His eyes never left young Ryan. They stared hard, seemed to turn back years, transform.

Young Joe Ryan felt their intensity. Jabbing the tar paddle back into the box, he stood up, angrily. "Get to it, Nugent! You act like maybe you seen me before!"

Kee blew out smoke, rubbed his teeth with the tip of his tongue. "I'm pretty sure I have."

"I don't remember it!"

"You couldn't. You were only a baby."

"A baby—?" Young Ryan broke off as Garth came across the yard from the stables. Anger lined Garth's face, and his fists were balled at his sides. Joe immediately began to fear what he speculated would take place.

Garth came to a halt three paces from Nugent. His voice snapped out with sharp, loud denunciation that reached into the barroom.

"Nugent, you deliberately butchered a cow belonging to Oley Myers without paying for it!"

Nugent abruptly transfixed Garth with eyes charged with surprise and deadly venom. Slowly removing his cigarette from his mouth with his left hand, his right came to a half-cocked position close to his gun. He spoke slowly, menacingly:

"You're saying a lot for just one man, Mitchum. Prove it!"

Garth stood lankily but alert, watching his man closely. "Your saddle bags got fresh jerky in them. Just the size of the chunk out of Oley's steer back on the trail, less one meal. And your pony tracks headed this way. Is that enough for one man, Nugent—or do you want more?"

Kee Nugent had killed for less. For a

moment he was statuesque, stiff and primed. Only his eyes moved. But he was very conscious of the men leaving the barroom *behind him*, moving across the yard, *behind him*, men who had indicated their distaste for him not many minutes ago. Some of those men *behind him* would pull their guns the instant he went for his own against Mitchum.

"What's the price, Mitchum?" he asked, his voice shrill with curbed rage.

"Twenty-five dollars."

Breathing heavily, Kee carefully moved his hand under his shirt to his doe-skin money belt. Putting his cigarette back into his mouth, he fished out three gold pieces, several silver dollars.

For a moment he thoughtfully jingled them in the palm of his right hand, his eyes glaring at Garth. Suddenly the coins flashed through the air. They landed with dull tinkling sounds in the dust at Garth's feet.

"Tell Oley the meat was tough!" Nugent snarled defiantly.

With that, Nugent turned half way around. Taking the cigarette from his mouth, he flicked it contemptuously at the scattered men behind him. Then, hitching at his pants belt, he marched defiantly, fearlessly, past Garth and young Ryan to the stables.

A few minutes later Nugent rode sullenly out of Pagosa Wells.

Garth stooped and picked up the coins. For a moment he jingled them in his palm. Then he turned to John Radnor who had come out with the others.

"See that Oley gets these, John. We got to be moving out."

Radnor took the money, shook his head. "No man has ever done what you did to Kee Nugent. You made him back down in front of an audience. He'll kill you for it someday, Garth."

Garth smiled. "You can't live forever."

FRESH TEAMS were in the traces half an hour later and young Ryan was again perched on his 'lazy-board'. Garth rode the sorrel in close to the wagon while they lumbered out of Pagosa Wells and headed for the foot of Squaw Man Pass. When they reached it, they halted

for a few minutes before starting up the pine-bordered grade.

"What I don't get, Garth," said young Ryan, "is Nugent's ability to hook up tough ol' man Ironhead Harlan Davis so quickly with my father. As if he knew something. Then claiming to know me when I was a baby. Darn if I ever heard my father mention a Kee Nugent when he talked to me about them early days out here."

"Maybe that Nugent handle is just a convenient one," replied Garth, checking the heavy brake arm and powerful, leather-shod brake shoes. "Stop worrying about him."

It took them two hours to work the heavy freight wagon up and over the Pass. On the downgrade Garth now tended the brake. Hitting a level stretch, he eased off and went back to the sorrel stud hitched to the tail-gate.

Reaching into his saddle-bag, Garth took out a worn pair of black field glasses. The sun was low on the uneven western horizon, and shadows were beginning to creep into the broad valley of the Tall Bear below.

For a long time he held the glasses on the moving speck in the distance. The rider was loping along the wagon trail that twisted through the foothills in the direction of Millbank. There was a flash of something bright. Replacing the glasses, Garth caught up with Joe Ryan.

"It's him, ain't it, Garth?" said Ryan, anxiously.

Garth kept staring ahead, then went to the brake handle, as they started down another grade. "I figured it would be," he said, hollowly. "He'll be wanting to level things."

Young Ryan braced himself against the pull of the down-grade. Shoulders back, reins tight in both hands, he called above the creaking wheels and jangling trace chains, "Keep away from him, Garth! You got a brand new cradle to fill someday. Laura Davis can't marry a dead man—with or without Ironhead's permission!"

It made Garth think of his little cattle spread growing in the hills along the Tall Bear. It meant everything to him. It

was tap-roots. Something to fasten himself to, hold him in line. Something that, together with Laura Davis, he could nourish into an approved symbol of his strength and love. Joe was right. He must try to avoid anything that had the power to destroy him or his dream.

"I'll do the best I can, Joe," he replied. "But what will be, will be."

With the coming of darkness, they halted and camped for the night ten miles out of Millbank.

Not Kee Nugent. He kept riding right on into the big settlement sprawled along the banks of the Tall Bear.

KEE NUGENT felt relatively safe in entering Millbank. Peace-officers to the south knew him all too well. Not here. In Millbank he felt sure there would be no one to point him out as Kee Nugent, the notorious gunman. At least, not until Garth Mitchum and young Ryan got in.

Darkness favored Nugent, too. Not many lamps burned in town, and the soft thud of his pony's hoofs as he rode warily down the dusty street aroused but little attention from the few about at this hour.

At last he found a livery stable. The entrance was next to the Plantman's Hardware Store, an oil lamp suspended from the cross log overhead. It seemed deserted.

Kee rode into the yard, dismounted. Giving a sharp whistle, he started pulling his saddle-bags from his horse. A door opened and closed. Quickly swinging his bags over his left arm, freeing his gun-hand, he turned to face the buck-toothed owner.

"Stable and feed him!" he ordered brusquely.

Kee turned to walk away, but the livery-man lifted an oil lantern high in order to see his face. The gunman tensed, lips thinned, the nerves of his gun-arm tingling with readiness. He pushed the lantern away.

"Got to see your face if I don't git your name," explained the stableman.

"The name's Luke Chase," snapped Nugent. "Just remember that name, but forget the face. Understand?" His tone was a threat.

The stableman hesitated, then shrugged.

"You're payin' the bill, stranger. That's all I care about."

Following instructions given concerning the whereabouts of hotel, Kee swung down the street. He moved cougarishly, like the hunted man that he was. The saloons were tempting. But they could wait. In order to live at all, Kee had long since learned to control and master his physical cravings.

Nearing the hotel, he suddenly made out the big black letters on a building across the street—HANNIBAL RYAN & SON. It was a long structure, two stories, with fence running along the sidewalk, at the end of which was a large gateway to the big yard inside.

The gunman slackened his stride. A spleenish grin spread around his cruel mouth. "So Hannibal got to be the big freighter he always said he wanted to be," he whispered to himself. "And Harlan Davis made himself the biggest rancher like he aimed for, too, eh?" Fine! Couldn't be better!"

The hotel mattress was lumpy but better than the hard ground on which Kee had slept for the past three weeks. And the food the owner scraped together sat more digestibly and fillingly under his loosened belt than the burnt beef from Oley's unfortunate cow.

Luke Chase was the name he gave the hotelman. And Luke Chase it was that he told the inquisitive barber the next morning after an early breakfast. But a different name didn't create a different manner in him.

Wary and alert, the uneasy sense of being hunted always with him, Nugent spent half an hour drifting around Millbank the next morning in order to get more familiar. Then he headed resolutely for the freight-line stables and office of Hannibal Ryan.

PHYSICALLY and financially, Hannibal Ryan was the biggest man in town. He sat at his scarred desk in the corner beside the office window, a pencil in his big, hairy-backed hand, working on a customer list. Early morning light lay brightly on his vast mane of silver-gray hair, sharply outlining the notched-out

memento in his ear of an Indian attack while crossing the plains years before.

There came the jingle of spurs. A tall figure in a beaver-skin vest suddenly appeared in the doorway off the stable-yard. The freighter swung around in his chair, his horsehide vest squeaking against the high arms of it. Raising a calloused thumb, Hannibal cocked back an ancient gray hat from his coarse-skinned forehead.

Well?"

Kee Nugent walked in slowly. As he drew near the familiar freighter, the years rolled back. "Hello, Hannibal," he said. "Remember me?"

Hannibal Ryan's eyes nearly pinched shut as he intently studied the cruel mouth and hardened stare of the armed man before him. He shook his head.

"No."

"You ought to." Nugent hooked his thumb in his belt, near his gun. "Remember a fourteen-year-old kid in a wagon train out of Kansas about twenty years ago? A kid without any kinfolk, sweatin' his way out here as a dung and cattle-nurse, mindin' kids, not even gettin' to own a gun until after that Indian attack at Brewster's Falls near—"

"*Luke Chase!*" cried the freighter.

Hannibal Ryan came up out of his chair like a man pricked with a hot knife. The color faded in his face. His eyes flashed whitely, besieged with shock, fear. A tremor went over his big frame. Nervously, he quickly laid his huge hands tightly against his thighs. Thighs around which he didn't have his belt and gun at the time.

"I see you remember," grinned Nugent. He boldly kept his hand on the butt of his own pistol. Hannibal was unarmed, but he wanted to lend emphasis as much and as quickly as he could. For he had not too much time.

The big freighter acted like a man abruptly stripped of his powers. He swallowed and breathed heavily. Then gripping the arms of his chair, he eased himself into a slumped, unnatural sitting position, his eyes riveted on Nugent.

"After all these years, you've come here," he said. "What for, Luke?"

The gunman sucked in his cheeks, made

a hissing noise with his pursed lips. Taking a turn about the office, he examined books and papers, then came back to halt wide-legged in front of the heavy breathing freighter.

"You're rich now, Hannibal," he said, all levity gone from his voice. "Twenty years ago you gave me my first pistol to keep my mouth shut. That won't do now."

Hannibal's eyes narrowed. He seemed to have recovered himself a little. "So that's it," he said, glaring at Nugent. "Going to try to force me to pay you big because of what you know about me and my Joe."

"Your Joe?"

"Yes!"

Nugent's eyes beamed. "Look, Hannibal," he said. "Maybe you would like to ride out to your old friend Harlan Davis and tell him a few facts."

"Shut that up!" The big freighter's eyes were white with fear that maybe someone outside the windows might have heard. Rising, he grabbed the sash, slammed it down, then turned angrily upon the man from out of the past that he knew only as Luke Chase.

"Luke," he said, "what kind of a fool do you think I am? Of course I don't want my old friend to know about Joe. I did a crazy thing that day of the Indian fight twenty years ago, and I'd have undone it twenty times over if I could have. But it was too late. My wife was sick. Our baby meant everything to her."

"So did Harlan Davis's to his wife," interrupted Nugent. "But I was only a kid, and none of that angle bothers me much, Hannibal. What matters is that I was the only one who saw you do it. Me—the kid you gave a pistol to to forget it and keep my mouth shut. Remember?"

"Like it was yesterday! And I've never stopped hating myself for it!" The freighter clenched his fists, brought them hard against his hips. "But the years have passed, Luke. Our wives are gone, but Harlan Davis, his daughter Laura and me have lived in peace and friendship all these years without the truth being known. It's going to go on that way, Luke. Understand?"

Nugent looked steadily at the big-

shouldered freighter. Derisive amusement gathered in his eyes. Then, his voice sharp with finality, he said:

"Ten thousand dollars by midnight, Hannibal—and it will go on that way."

The dogged strength that had built up his freight lines, his yards, his home and fortune seemed to swell up within Hannibal Ryan. For a moment he hesitated. Suddenly he lashed out with his fist.

NUGENT had been tensed, alert. But still the big man was quicker than he thought. Twisting his head to avert the blow, it was not enough, and Hannibal's hairy-backed knuckles missed Nugent's jaw but hit the side of his neck.

It was a grazing blow. But the weight behind it was enough to throw Nugent off balance. He stumbled against the pot-bellied iron stove in the center of the office. Hannibal lunged to close in—

"*Don't be a fool!*"

Hannibal stopped suddenly in his lurching attempt to grapple with Nugent. For a moment he teetered on his boot-toes. His eyes, wide and white, stared with astonishment at the round, black mouth of Nugent's pistol!

It was done so smoothly it was almost unbelievable. One moment Hannibal had seen Nugent stumbling, off balance. The next instant Nugent was stiffened against the stove, his gun suddenly in his fist.

"Killing comes very easy for me, Hannibal," purred Nugent. There was an animal-like glitter to his eyes now. His lip curled back crookedly over his teeth, like a wolf about to rush and slash. "Ten thousand dollars before midnight. You'll find me out at Harlan Davis' ranch, talking over the old days. Old days, Hannibal—like me sometimes taking care of a pair of two-week old babies. Baby boys left alone in two Conestoga wagons wheeled close together during an Indian attack at Brewster's Falls."

"Get out of here!" yelled Hannibal wildly.

Nugent took his time. Backing to the door, he slid his gun back into its holster. Then saluting Hannibal with a grand gesture, he repeated again: "By midnight—or Harlan gets told the truth about those

babies and the one killed by the arrow!"

Nugent was gone. The office was quiet, empty. An agonized expression swept over Hannibal Ryan's coarse-skinned face. Dropping into his chair, he folded his arms on his scarred desk and sank his face into them.

He seemed to shrivel a little, his shoulders squeezing together. The years turned back, and once again he was shielding his body beside a Conestoga wagon, firing his rifle as rapidly as he could at the circling band of yelling savages that had swept down upon the wagon train to massacre. Night fell. Flaming arrows arched through the black sky, struck into the wagon enclosure, hit hooped canvas tops, struck a two-week old baby boy, his boy, Martha's—

"I've got to go on keeping the truth from Ironhead Harlan!" he groaned aloud, his knuckles white with determination. "I've got to! But how to stop Luke. How—" He paused; then hope sprang into his eyes.

"Garth will do it!" he cried. "He'd do anything for me if I help him with his ranch!"

SHORTLY AFTER NOON Garth and Joe brought the big Weber built freight wagon lumbering across the plank bridge spanning Tall Bear creek, started it down the main street on the edge of town.

The kids of Millbank spotted Garth first. He was riding fifty yards in advance of the plodding teams and had just finished striking a match on his belt to light his cigarette.

"What kind did you bring us this time, Garth?" called a carrot-topped youngster, running out into the road from where he had been playing with two other boys. "Get any licorice? Did you . . . huh?"

Garth smiled and swung the sorrel to the side of the road to let Joe and the long outfit pass on down to Hannibal's wagon sheds and warehouse.

"You kids never forget, do you?" he said, reaching down into his saddle-bag and pulling out a large paper bag full of assorted candies.

It was a regular ritual, never varying

whenever he came back from a trip. And it never ended until he had walked his horse the length of the main street to the stables, distributing piece after piece to every kid and dog that caught sight of him. And when the big bag was finally empty, Garth, a smile broad as a barn-door on his face and warm as an oven inside, knew that he had finished his last ride as guard for Hannibal Ryan. From now on it was his ranch, his cattle—and Laura.

"Garth! Come in here when you're through!"

It was Hannibal, hollering from the office doorway. Garth, stripping his gear from the sorrel in the stable yard, looked up. Hannibal sounded worried and excited.

"Where's Joe?" asked Garth later, when he entered the office after stabling his mount.

Ryan sat tensely on the edge of his scarred desk. "Sent him over to Dunston's place with an order of wire," he replied. "I had to talk to you alone, Garth. Sit down someplace."

Garth was puzzled. For the first time in the years he had known the hard-driving, self-confident freighter, Hannibal seemed afraid.

Unbuckling his heavy gun and belt, Garth laid them on a table full of order books and papers. Taking a chair beside the cold, pot-bellied stove, he pulled out his tobacco papers and looked at his boss.

"What is it, Hannibal?"

Hannibal ran his big, blunt-fingers through his shock of silver-grey hair. "I've got one last job for you, Garth!" He spoke gaspingly, half angrily. Not at Garth, but at himself. "I'd do it myself, only I can't!"

Garth licked his cigarette, eyed Ryan closely. The freighter was never a man to show any weaknesses. Whatever troubled him must be enormous.

"Sorry, Hannibal," he replied. "I've got a lot of work to do on my ranch. Got to make a top showing by this Fall. I'm depending on it to change Ironhead's idea about Laura and me getting married."

"Sure. Sure, I know, Garth." Hannibal thumped his knee impatiently. "But this shouldn't take you long to do. You're

the only man I could trust. Do this for me, Garth, and I'll see that you get ten Hereford bulls for breeding in a month."

Garth knew the value of good breeding stock. That was the core of Ironhead's vast herds. He needed good bulls badly.

"What do you want me to do?"

Ryan wet his lips nervously. "Garth, a man's come into town with the power to make my Joe hate me and Ironhead want to kill me——"

"What! What man could ever do that? Why Joe's your kid, and Ironhead's your best friend!"

Hannibal shook his head gravely. "What this hombre Luke Chase knows about me would change all that."

"And just what does he know about you, Hannibal?" Garth could recall nothing infamous about the hard-fisted freighter, and the implication seemed preposterous.

HANNIBAL looked away and began jamming tobacco into his pipe with hard thrusts of his blunt thumb. "That I can't tell you, Garth. It's just impossible! It's something that only Luke Chase and I know. Something he swears he'll tell Ironhead unless I pay him ten thousand dollars by midnight."

Garth got up slowly from his chair. His spurs tinkled, as he thoughtfully rubbed his boot-soles on the gritty floor. He looked at the slumped shoulders of the man to whom loyalty had been his daily creed for so long. Joe's father. A good man. A strong man apparently with one weak spot that someone knew how to touch in order to wither him, to fill him with panic.

Garth laid his hand on Hannibal's shoulder. "Alright. I won't ask again what it is," he said understandingly. "Who is Luke Chase?"

"He was a quick-thinking kid of fourteen that came west in the wagon train with Harlan Davis and me twenty years ago," explained the silver-haired freighter. "Could lick twice his weight among the other kids. Had quite a hankering for guns, too, although he owned none then. There was an Indian attack on the wagons, and I felt forced to do something only he

saw me do. I gave him my best pistol then to keep him quiet. He left the wagon train a few weeks later, and I've never seen or heard of him again until this morning."

"Where is he now?"

"On his way out to Ironhead's Diamond D," replied Hannibal, laying aside his pipe. "I want you to reach him out there before midnight. Before he says anything to Ironhead or Joe."

Garth's eyes narrowed rebelliously. "Hope you're not asking me to deliberately kill a man for you, Hannibal."

Ryan shook his head. "No, I'm not asking you to do that," he explained. "But you are the only man I think can handle him. I want you to take ten thousand dollars to him. Only don't give it to him until you get him fifty miles away from this range. I want him cleared out for good."

Garth was puzzled. "But why can't you do that yourself?"

Hannibal clenched his fists. "If I meet him again, I'd likely lose my head and try to kill him. And if I did that, I couldn't give Ironhead or anybody the truth for my doing it. Ironhead would figure it the same as murdering an old friend, and I couldn't explain why. It's best that Luke Chase is paid off and kept away from here."

Garth hesitated. Turning, he picked up his belt and gun, thoughtfully strapped it around his dusty hips. He was reluctant about the whole thing. It might get him in trouble with Ironhead, Laura's bitter father.

Then he glanced at Hannibal. The freighter's wide eyes were charged with fear, with the awful *thing* that only he and Luke Chase knew. Just what accursed action could Hannibal have been forced to do twenty years ago that now should be worth as much as ten thousand dollars to conceal from everyone?

"Have the money ready in an hour," Garth told him abruptly. "I'll make this one last ride for you. But only because I'd never want to see your Joe hating you for anything you ever did. He thinks too much of you."

Turning quickly to the door, Garth went out into the street.

IT WAS PAST NOON, and he started in the direction of his favorite restaurant. A puncher spur-jingled across the street toward the Alamo Saloon, the silver-conchas on his chaps flashing in the sunlight. Garth was instantly reminded of Kee Nugent, the gunman.

A tingling sensation of cautious alertness swept over him. The outlaw was almost certain to be somewhere in or around Millbank. Nugent just wasn't the kind that would easily forget what had happened at Pagosa Wells.

Garth shrugged, aggravated and angered by the whole complicated situation that had so suddenly been woven around him. It was more than enough trying to prove up single-handedly on his little ranch in the hope of changing over Ironhead's feelings about him and Laura. But should Laura's father find out that he was a party to concealing anything important from him, Ironhead would wipe away his little spread as easily and with as little compunction as he would brush crumbs from his lavish table-top!

Grunting with disgust, Garth shoved his lanky frame through the doorway of the Birdcage Restaurant. As he ordered, he saw Hannibal Ryan pass on his way to the bank for the money.

Half an hour later Garth was back outside again. Leaning against the spruce hitching bar at the gutter side of the walk, he slowly rolled a cigarette. He wondered if he was going to have much trouble herding this Luke Chase blackmailer fifty miles off range. He also wondered what he looked like, for Hannibal hadn't told him.

Sucking hard on his cigarette, Garth turned on his heel and headed back toward the freighter's depot.

"Garth! Wait!"

Garth had just passed the entrance to Humbolt's Dry Goods store. From it came a lovely young woman dressed in white shirt-waist and dark riding skirt. Under her arm was a package, and now she hurried and caught Garth by his sleeve.

"Laura! I didn't know you were in town."

Garth immediately lost awareness of all

other things. The sun was gleaming from Laura's wheat-colored hair. Her eyes were warm, silently speaking her love for him. A man was foolish to wait so long to marry, he thought. How much longer must he endure being without her?

"I came in yesterday," Laura told him, as they moved into the shade of the building wall. "Sally Emerson's birthday is tomorrow, and I'm staying with her." She paused, touched his chin affectionately with the tips of her fingers, smiled. "Garth, did you bring back anything for us?"

Garth hesitated. Flushing, he met her eyes and replied, "A cradle."

She laughed a soft, half-choked little laugh and pulled at his shirt-button. Then a frown spread darkly over her sun-tanned features and she looked away.

"I'm afraid for us, Garth."

Anger began to mount within Garth. He caught her arms firmly. "Stop being afraid!" His voice was sharp. "We have my ranch-cabin and a few head of cattle. That's enough to start. Why, hang-it-all, it's more than Ironhead himself had when he came out here!"

"I know, Garth," replied Laura. "And I'm satisfied. But my father—you just don't understand him deeply enough. It's just that I'm the only child he has left. When he lost my baby brother so many years ago, it did something awful to him. He was not always so selfish, so bitter and sour. But since then there's nothing that belongs to him that he has any intentions of ever letting go. He's sure to make trouble for us, Garth."

Garth had heard it all before. And he was weary of the old argument. No man had the right to block the happiness of two people as Ironhead Harlan Davis had been doing. The tragedy of Ironhead's own life should have no bearing on the future of anyone else.

"Laura," he said. "I've got to go out to the Diamond D right away."

"No, Garth. Not now." She spoke quickly, anxiously. "You're angry. You might make trouble. Father is so hot-headed and blind to reason at times when anyone argues with him. He might do anything."

"But I must go, Laura," insisted Garth,

unable to reveal that it was for Hannibal Ryan.

"Not today, Garth." She fingered his shirt buttons in the old familiar way he liked so much, tugged at his shirt collar. "Besides, I'm staying in town for a few days. We could see a lot of each other. After that we could ride out to the ranch together."

Garth laid his hand warmly over hers, shook his head. "I must go," he told her. "It's important. And I'll be away for a few days."

It seemed to puzzle her. And he wanted to explain about Hannibal and the ten thousand dollars he must give to Luke Chase after he got him fifty miles off the range. But he couldn't. Hannibal trusted him too much.

Laura bit her lips, her lovely eyes charged with anxiety and disappointment. "If you must go, and won't tell me why, then be careful, Garth," she told him, as he turned away. "Don't get father mad. He might do something awful—and I love you too much."

HANNIBAL RYAN was waiting in his office, pacing the floor, when Garth strode in. The big, hairy-armed freighter had a large, oblong leather folder in one hand. It bulged, and Garth immediately concluded that the money in greenbacks must be within it.

Hannibal jerked his pipe from his lips. "Your horse is saddled and ready, out in the yard, Garth," he said, handing him the container. "Promise me you'll tell no one about this!"

"I'll do the best I can—for Joe's sake," replied Garth, with pointed emphasis on the last.

Garth left the office and crossed the yard to the shade under the stable sheds. A powerful claybank gelding was waiting, fully geared with blankets, rifle boot and saddle-bags. In the one bag he placed the bulging leather folder. In the other he found several days stock of cold food.

Garth shoved his toe into the stirrup. At this moment there came the rattle of wagon wheels and beating hoofs as a team curled in through the gates from the street. It was young Joe, returning from

his delivery to Dunston's.

"Hey!" cried Joe, when he spotted Garth about to mount. "Where you headed all geared up like that?"

"Just ridin'," stalled Garth, as Hannibal's son flipped the reins to a stable-hand and clumped across the yard toward him.

"Is it a secret?"

"Sort of."

Garth saw Hannibal standing in the office doorway. The big man's features were charged with white fear. Swinging up into his saddle, Garth eased his six-gun to a comfortable position, then looked into Joe's questioning eyes. He had never kept anything back from him. He hated having to do it now, but he must.

"I'm headed out for the Diamond D," he said, and quickly rode from the yard.

Young Ryan followed Garth's disappearing back with eyes filled with puzzled speculation and fear. He found no satisfaction in his friend's manner or replies. Something was up. Something Garth had to keep from him.

Joe became afraid for him—for he had passed Kee Nugent out on the range.

And Nugent had wanted to know the way to the Diamond D . . .

BY LATE AFTERNOON Garth was splashing the claybank across Bannock Run. Before him lay Elliott's Hollow, a long grassy depression winding between two long hills. This marked the three-quarter point to the Diamond D ranch headquarters.

Elliott's Hollow was a part of his own small holding, and now he spotted several head of his own cattle mingled with Ironhead's on the slopes of the hills. Some day he meant those slopes to be crowded full with his own brand as well as Ironhead's. Only how could you, with a man like Ironhead flanking you on every side.

Garth's mouth set hard. All the boundaries of his own outfit lay within the vast mass of range controlled by Laura's father. It had been only reluctant concession on Ironhead's part that he had been allowed to buy into Ironhead's immense holdings in the first place. Hannibal had helped. But the set-up gave Iron-

head a tremendous advantage. And that seemed the reason for it. For all that the wealthy rancher had to do should he ever want to break him was to throw up wire fences along every line—and he'd be trapped inside without an outlet to water or winter range.

Reaching the middle of the hollow, Garth suddenly snapped his glance up toward the ridge on his right. He wasn't sure at first. Then he again caught the dancing glint of reflected sunlight among the tree-spiked crown of the ridge.

"*Kee Nugent!*"

The name hissed instinctively from his lips. It couldn't be any other. Those silver fasteners on the gunman's vest—

Garth quickly cast around for immediate shelter. There was none. The nearest trees were eighty yards to his left. He was riding alone in the center of the long, open hollow like a bug on a flat board!

Garth rarely used his spurs viciously. But now he slashed them into the flanks of the claybank. As the surprised animal leaped, there came the sharp crack of a rifle from the ridge.

Garth jerked with the impact of the slug. As pain tore through his side, he lurched half out of his saddle, his balance lost. The claybank lunged and Garth grabbed desperately for the horn, missed it!

He began to fall headfirst from the side of his saddle. For an instant panic joined with pain tore through Garth. The stirrup! Should his foot catch in it, he'd—

He dropped clear of it, the claybank's spading hoofs slashing close to his face. Jolting agony jarred through him as he hit the ground. He rolled. And then there was the bony crack as his head struck an outcropping of rock in the grass.

Garth lay still . . .

Up on the ridge, the sinking sun sprayed light through the branches on the powerful man standing in the brush. Leering satisfaction twisted Kee Nugent's cruel mouth.

Lowering his Winchester carbine, he turned back to his horse where he had halted to eat the remains of Oley's cold roasted cow. Shoving the rifle back into its worn leather saddle boot, he swung into his rig and reined around to start

down the slope to the motionless form on the floor of the hollow below. He wanted to make certain his aim had been true.

Suddenly he reined up short.

From along Garth's back trail, a horseman broke out into the Elliot's Hollow. The rider, seeing Garth's form spurred his horse furiously toward it, flung himself from his saddle.

Nugent's lips twisted with disappointment. He would need the newcomer alive for his future purposes. For he had instantly recognized the rider now down beside Garth as young Joe.

"Complete or part payment for Pagosa Wells, Mitchum," Nugent murmured to himself; then he swung his pony around and continued along the brushy ridge trail toward the ranch headquarters of Iron-head Harlan Davis.

COLD FEAR gripped Joe Ryan as he went down in the grass beside Garth. Garth meant as much to him as a brother. They had shared much together. He was sure Garth was dead.

"You fool!" he cried. "You damn fool! Why didn't you wait back in town. I could have told you that dirty gunman was tracking all over this range—"

He had turned Garth over, and a sigh had escaped Garths lips. Blood was trickling from the gash in his scalp, and there was the stain of blood on his shirt just above his hip and cartridge belt. But Garth still breathed!

Joe lost no time. He knew the hollow was but about a mile from Garth's little cabin. Flinging himself into his saddle, he quickly rounded up Garth's claybank and roped Garth's unconscious form in the saddle.

When Garth opened his eyes, he at first didn't know where he was. Slowly, the familiarity of the surroundings awakened the truth. His own hands had laid those coarse logs walling him in. He had mixed the chinking between them. The window frame and sash he had hauled out from Millbank. And the creaking iron bed he was now lying on he had bought from Sam Bentley when the latter broke up after his wife died—

Then Garth saw Joe coming in from the

kitchen, licking a cigarette.

"Joe!" He started to raise up, then fell back again. Pain, like a mallet-driven knife, plunged through his side. "Joe, what happened? Where did you come from? How did I—"

Joe quickly shut him up by sticking the cigarette between Garth's lips. Then he explained about having met Nugent on the way back from Dunston's, and the gunman's request for directions to the Diamond D.

"What can Nugent want at the Diamond D?" asked Garth.

"Don't know. Can't figure it," replied Joe.

Garth strained himself up enough to sit on the edge of the bed. All he had on was his grey underwear and a lump of clean rags strapped to his wound under it. Listening to Joe, looking at him, he had kept thinking of Hannibal, of the man Luke Chase who would talk after midnight and so make Joe hate his father unless he got there in time.

Garth reached out for his trousers lying on the chair beside the bed. "I've got to get on out to the Diamond D, Joe," he said. "You stay here and—"

Joe quickly snatched the pants from Garth's fingers. Throwing them across the room, he snapped, "You're not going anywhere, savvy? Especially no place where Kee Nugent's gun can work on you again. You're going to stay right here until you rest up plenty from that bullet Nugent drove into you. I got it out of you while you were still unconscious. It didn't hit anything vital. But that ain't an invitation for you to start prancin' around any yet. That's an order. Now shut up while I see if I can rustle some grub together out in the kitchen for supper."

Garth was going to suggest the food in his saddle-bags, then realized he couldn't. What if Joe should discover the ten thousand, ask questions?

Garth began to worry. How was he going to get away from Joe and reach the Diamond D before midnight?

In all his life Garth had never found himself backed into such a ticklish corner. He kept thinking of his cabin, of how much it meant to him. Tap-roots. Some-

thing to fasten himself to. Something that, together with Laura and his cattle, he could nourish, turn into a worthwhile symbol of effort.

He had to carry this thing through, somehow. He'd have to get away from Joe quick. At the same time he'd have to avoid Nugent at the Diamond D and whisk away a Luke Chase—and do it all without clashing with hot-headed Ironhead Harlan!

The sun went down and Joe brought Garth his supper. For a few hours they sat, smoked and talked. Then taking Garth's pants and boots, Joe went out into the kitchen and made a bed on the floor for himself with extra blankets.

Lying in the dark, Garth watched the moon rise. Another hour passed, and the moonlight striping in through the window moved its milkish pattern across the plank floor.

Garth sweated with impatience. It was only an hour's ride from his cabin to the Diamond D ranch-house. If he was to make it in time, he would have to be in the saddle not later than ten thirty. And it was after ten now!

Years of close comradeship had made him familiar with Joe's sleeping habits. Some nights Joe snored, others he didn't. But always he was a light sleeper, easily aroused by the slightest disturbance.

From the kitchen came silence. For another half hour Garth impatiently watched the moonlight moving on the floor in its slow, time consuming progress. But still no snoring from Joe.

He could wait no longer. He must risk it.

Easing his legs over the side of the bed, he came to his feet. For a moment he winced with pain from the stiff soreness of his wound. Then he cautiously crossed the broad, plank flooring to the kitchen.

In the quarter light of the moon, he could distinguish the motionless form on the floor. Pursing his lips, he made a faint, birdlike sound—a distant signal they had used years ago for recognition when on picket duty during the war. It would tell him for sure whether Joe was awake yet or not.

There came no responsive movement.

It took Garth but five minutes to recover his pants and boots, dress himself and strap on his cartridge belt and gun. Hoping his wound wouldn't open, he picked up his saddle-bags. Then slipping from the cabin, he quickly went to the shed outside and saddled the claybank.

He glanced up at the moon. It was late. Too late, he feared. If he made it in time to the Diamond D, it would be a miracle!

Toeing into his stirrup, teeth clamped hard against the pain, he settled into his saddle. His other boot found the stirrup, and he quickly walked the claybank from his beloved little ranchyard. He must not waken Joe.

When safely out of earshot of the cabin Garth rolled his spurs and thundered in the direction of Ironhead's ranch headquarters.

SQUINT-EYED against the whip of the wind, Garth beat his way up the valley of the Tall Bear. Time and again he glanced at the moon. He was racing against its movement in the sky, its record of precious minutes passing. He damned Nugent and his bullet.

Pounding around the dark shoulder of a small hog-back, the vast Diamond D layout suddenly came into view ahead. Not a light showed at this distance.

Still uncertain of the time, Garth spurred the heaving claybank past the corrals and barns, then took the well-kept lane that led between the sentry-like elms up to the broad porch fronting the ranchhouse. He saw no sign of activity anywhere.

The long house looked like a slab of white marble in the moonlight. A tiny, single light appeared in one window. It came from the room at the west end of the ranchhouse where Garth knew Ironhead usually transacted all his private business.

Was he too late? Had this blackmailer Luke Chase given up waiting for Hannibal's move? Was he and Ironhead together in that small room now?

Garth reined the claybank down to a quiet walk. He cautiously led it up to the long hitch-bar under the trees flanking the porch.

Swinging out of the saddle, he winced, then was toeing cautiously across the porch

through the deep shadows toward the lighted window.

It was open, for the night was warm. He could easily hear the sharp, harsh voice of Ironhead Harlan. That—and another voice that brought up the hairs at the back of Garth's neck stiff and bristling. A voice he remembered from Pagosa Wells—*Kee Nugent's!*

Only—only Ironhead was calling him Luke Chase!

Garth quickly flattened his back against the wall. Bewildered, he removed his hat, then inched his eye past the edge of the window frame. His teeth came clicking together, vengefully. Automatically, he let his finger curl around the butt of his holstered gun. Luke Chase and Nugent were one and the same!

And he was too late!

“——don't make fun of such a thing, Luke!” came the sharp, snapping voice of Ironhead. “My son's not alive! My baby Jess was killed by a burning arrow twenty years ago! You were there! It struck him in the face, burned him beyond recognition before we could get the wagon fire out!”

Kee Nugent shook his head. He grinned cruelly. He was standing beside a field-rock fireplace, smoking. The light from a small oil lamp kept dancing fitfully on the silver T-fasteners of his vest. He had had dinner with the tall rancher, and as was the custom, he had hung his belt and gun on the antler rack in the hallway. He was therefore unarmed, but felt no disadvantage here, for so was his raucous host across the room.

“That wasn't your baby, Harlan,” said Nugent. “It was somebody else's. Your son is alive and well today.”

Garth almost gasped aloud. Was this the awful truth Hannibal wanted kept from his old friend? He had to know. He swung his glance toward the cattle king of Tall Bear valley.

Ironhead Harlan had just poured himself a drink. Now the glass was shaking in his thick-tendonized, worm-like veined hand. Shadow and light played on the planes and seams of his stiff, implastic features. His eyes flashed like diamonds, reflecting crystallized hardness within.

“Luke,” came Ironhead's violent voice,

"if you're tantalizing me with an ugly joke, I'll break your back over my knee! If it's true, where's my Jess now?"

The gunman snuffed, blowing twin streams of smoke from his flaring nostrils. "I'm a business man, Harlan," he replied. "What's it worth to know?"

The wealthy rancher now eyed the man he had known as a boy as he would a copperhead that had him backed against a rock wall. Shaken by the explosive nature of the revelation, he set down his glass of brandy and leaned heavily on the edge of the thick table in the center of the room.

"Five thousand dollars—if you can prove it!" came his barking reply.

The gunman laughed. "Chicken feed, Harlan. Remember, you're bargaining for your own flesh and blood coming to life again."

"Ten thousand!"

Nugent smirked, studied the tip of his glowing cigarette. "You're talking about your own boy, Jess. If I were rich, it would be worth double that to have a son come alive to me that I believed dead for over twenty years."

Ironhead's massive chest swelled under his white shirt. His strong white teeth flashed angrily in the yellow lamplight.

"Twenty thousand it is, then! But if you can't prove it true, I'll have you tied to a wheel and bull-whipped into bloody shreds!"

Kee Nugent had never before let any man talk to him like that. His eyes smoldered, and he snapped his cigarette into the cold ashes of the fireplace.

FOR A MOMENT Garth thought it was over. He expected to see Nugent quit the room. He was about to turn away to intercept him, when he heard the gunman start talking again, fast.

"The wagons were in a circle that day. Remember, Harlan? Yours was next to Hannibal Ryan's. All the women folk were busy reloading and passing out rifles in the center. I was told to keep an eye on the younger kids and babies.

"Hannibal had put his kid Joe in your wagon with your Jess that morning. Things were hot and looked bad. Couple

of wagons were on fire already, and everybody was damn busy. I saw yours smoking, ran toward it. But Hannibal got inside first.

"As I jumped up on the seat and looked in under the hooped canvas, I saw the one kid bleeding, its clothes flaming, a rag-wrapped arrow stuck in its face. It was up in the front of the wagon-bed, where I had last left your kid Jess. Hannibal seemed to be just laying it there. Then he picked up the other baby. Being friends, your wives had dressed the two kids pretty much alike. And there's not much sharp difference in babies two weeks old. You wouldn't notice it in that crazy excitement, anyway.

"But as Hannibal saw me and started out of the burning wagon, the kid's little shirt came undone in the back. I saw the small mole on the left shoulder blade. Outside of you and your wife, I was about the only one in that wagon train that knew about your Jess having that birth mark on him. Your missus didn't like it and never talked it around.

"I didn't say nothing. Just stared. And Hannibal guessed that somehow I knew the switch he was making. He cursed and shoved his pistol at me and told me to keep my mouth shut if I wanted it. Then he rushed outside, yelled for his wife, gave her your kid and told her to get into their own wagon and stay there. After the fight, when they found her with the Indian rifle bullet through her, you may remember Hannibal gave the kid to one of the Mandel sisters to take care of it for him the rest of the way."

Kee Nugent stopped talking and stared speculatively at Ironhead. Silence gripped the little room. The cold, steel-dispositioned rancher stood with shoulders sloped, his eyes fixed on nothing existing in the room—only on that which existed on the dark canvas of his tormented mind.

"That makes Joe Ryan my boy—my Jess—not Hannibal's," came his deep gasping voice at last.

"Yes," answered Nugent.

On the porch outside, Garth leaned tensely against the wall. Could Joe actually be Jess Davis? Laura's brother? Or was this just a cunning scheme on Nu-

gent's part to bleed Ironhead of big money?

Ironhead's voice now came like a menacing dirge:

"I'm going to kill Hannibal Ryan before sunset tomorrow!"

Through the window Garth could see the grim, ashen palor of Laura's father. There was murder etched in every line of his face. But to kill his old friend!

"I'll want my money before then," protested Nugent.

"You'll get it!" roared Ironhead, explosively banging his fist on the table-top, spilling the brandy. "Only I ought to kill you as well for not telling me the truth that day! You helped to keep my Jess dead to me! Yet now you bring him back to life for me. I have to be indebted to you for that. For what Harlan Davis has promised he'll pay, he pays out—life, death, or cash!"

GARTH'S ATTENTION riveted malevolently on Nugent. Nugent, the cutthroat slaughterer of poor Oley's cow. Nugent, the fugitive gunman who cruelly smashed a glass from a kid's fingers for simply mentioning his name. Now Nugent, a black-mailing snake wriggling out of the past to strike the minds of men with hate and murder. Nugent, whose bullet brand he now carried painfully on his side!

"Pretty speeches don't count, Harlan," argued the gunman inside. "I want the cash now. You had buyers here today, you told me, and they paid off for the big shipment you made a month ago. I'll take twenty thousand right now!"

"You'll take nothing!" roared Garth. And he came shoving through the open window, head and shoulders first, gun out and leveled. Kicking a chair out of his way, he snapped, "Don't move, Nugent! You may be unarmed, but I'll give it to you!"

The surprised gunman gaped, dropped back a few steps toward the door leading into the hallway where his gun and belt hung on the elk rack. Then he halted.

Ironhead, at first startled, now moved angrily toward Garth. "What's the idea of breaking in here like this!" he cried, eyes flashing at the man who thought he could

take his Laura away from him. "Put that gun down, you fool! This man is Luke Chase! I knew him as a boy!"

Garth kept moving away from Ironhead, closer to Nugent. "He's a dirty gun-bum on the run, Ironhead," insisted Garth. "You've heard of Kee Nugent. Outlawed in three states, wanted for half a dozen killings. Since you know the truth anyway, I'll tell you something. Nugent tried to get Hannibal to pay him ten thousand to keep him from spilling to you. That's why I'm here. Hannibal got me to bring it to stop him before he——"

"You, too!" cried Ironhead. And then Ironhead made the mistake. Angry, bull-headed, he thoughtlessly shoved himself in between Garth's leveled gun and Nugent.

"Out of the way——!" yelled Garth.

Too late! Shielded, Nugent saw his chance. Now that Garth had exposed him, he had to get clear fast. Slamming his hands against Ironhead's back, he shoved the big rancher straight into Garth's gun. Then he twisted and darted into the hallway.

Garth felt the rancher's stumbling body hit the snout of his pistol. The weight of Ironhead threw him backward, off balance. He tried to free his trigger finger from the guard in time, but couldn't! He'd kill Ironhead if it went off!

As the two went crashing to the floor, Ironhead on top of him, Garth desperately jammed his finger between the hammer and firing pin, saving Ironhead's life. Ironhead's crushing weight gusted the breath out of him, brought hot agony to his wounded side.

Out in the hall, Nugent grabbed his hat, belt and gun. Garth could hear him racing for the door. Nugent couldn't risk being trapped by an aroused household and bunkhouse. In flight lay his only security now.

The gunman came running out onto the porch, buckling on his gun-belt. There would not be time or chance to saddle his own horse, down in the corral. His flashing eyes searched the moonlit yard. Then he saw Garth's claybank outlined at the hitch-bar flanking the porch.

As a light appeared in the aroused bunkhouse window, Nugent ran down the steps,

caught the reins and leaped into the saddle. His spurs flashed in the moonlight, dug cruelly into the claybank's flanks. There was the rataplan of hoofs, and he went racing out of the Diamond D yard—with Hannibal's ten thousand in the saddle-bag at his knee!

IN SIDE, IRONHEAD EXPLODED with curses, and came lurching up on his feet, dragging Garth with him.

"Let go, you fool!" protested Garth, sheathing his gun and trying to wrench free quickly enough to pursue Nugent. "He's riding my horse! Got Hannibal's ten thousand dollars—!"

"To hell with him and the ten thousand now!" cried Ironhead, keeping his vise-like grip on Garth's shirt-front. "You knew the truth about Joe! You were helping to trick me! Helping Hannibal—!"

"I didn't know the truth any sooner than you!"

"I don't believe it!"

With a mighty heave, Ironhead shoved Garth stumbling backward until Garth's spine slammed against the wall. In the lamplight, Ironhead's eyes were glittering balls of crystal hard malice.

"I'm going to kill Hannibal, but first I'm going to beat you! Beat you senseless! Then I'm going to take my men and wipe your ten-cent spread from the face of this range—my range! You—you who wanted my Laura! Why you ain't worth the leather in her boots now! You schemed with Hannibal to keep my boy from me—!"

He came lunging at Garth. And Garth suddenly knew that he was glad. Glad because for so long he had passively tolerated the bitter antagonism of a selfish, bitter man for Laura's sake. But now—

Garth was trapped in the corner of the room where Ironhead's powerful thrust had shoved him. And as Ironhead's big fist now came smashing for his face, he ducked and drove his own knuckles hard into the rancher's stomach.

Garth wanted to end it quick. For there was Nugent and the ten thousand. But first he wanted to vent some of the pent up impatience he had felt with Laura's father. Maybe he could even make him human

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again.

But Ironhead had battled his way, fist and gun, to his present eminence on the range. He was six-foot-two, lean and powerful. And although he grunted with pain as Garth caught him in the stomach, he ripped out his thick-veined fist against Garth's jaw as Garth desperately curled out of the corner. Then Ironhead closed in, beat lefts and rights into Garth's face, drove him back across the room, roaring oaths.

The sharp edge of the table rammed against Garth's wounded side. It did something to him. Blind rage abruptly flooded through him. The power of madness and not impatience now flowed through his veins. Spitting blood from his mouth, he lowered his head, charged, and beat his knuckles into the hard-lined face before him.

There was the sickening thud of bone on bone, as the two slugged it out. Both were gasping for breath, bleeding. Neither saw the amazed cook standing in the doorway, nor the half dozen ranchhands from the bunkhouse that were gathering behind the cook in the hallway.

Garth felt himself weakening. To breathe was becoming agony. And he could feel the hot blood from his re-opened wound.

But he also could see Ironhead's big shoulders slumping. He could hear the whistling of Ironhead's tortured breathing, and now the rancher's bloodshot eyes were blinking with doubt and pain.

He'd have to end it—soon!

"Keep back!" roared Ironhead, as several of the hands suddenly attempted to interfere. And with his words, Ironhead lunged at Garth afresh.

The earlier sting was not in the blow that crashed against Garth's jaw, snapping back his head. Garth knew it. But he could not take any more of them. Summing every ounce of remaining strength he had, he pulled down his chin, burtowed in again, his bleeding knuckles flailing out like piston-rods.

Ironhead grunted, stumbled back. Garth rushed in. Once more he batted the fierce rancher's head sidewise. And suddenly the knees of the Diamond D king buckled.

Ironhead fell. His shoulders hit the edge

of the table, tilting it over. The lamp slid, would have hit the floor, but the cook quickly leaped in and caught it in time.

Ironhead sat there, braced with one hand, bloody chin buried against his heaving chest. Garth stood over him for a moment, gasping. But Ironhead didn't raise his face, and Garth, half staggering with exhaustion, stumbled toward the door.

For a moment it seemed the Diamond D hands were going to block him. Then his fiery eyes met theirs—and they opened up a lane for him.

OUT IN THE MOONLIGHT, Garth paused, sucked in deep breaths of cool air. He walked wearily across the yard toward the barns and corrals. Reaching a wooden watering trough, he dropped to his knees and buried his face and head into the cool water.

He repeated it three times. Then he turned and sat there, his back braced against the side of the trough, face dripping.

He breathed painfully, gaining his strength. He kept his eyes turned toward the ranchhouse, his hand near the butt of his gun. But he saw no one come out. And that told him much.

The clash that Laura had feared had come about. And the thing he had feared even more was being planned inside, he felt sure. For Ironhead always did anything he said he would. As sure as it was night, Ironhead would fence him off from water and grass, bust him back to the nothing he was when he first came into Tall Bear valley!

And he couldn't do anything to stop him.

Garth's battered lips came together grimly. He'd made a mess of everything. And he blamed it all on Kee Nugent. Had it not been for the fugitive gunman and his secret, he'd have been quits with Hannibal and already settled on his little spread. He'd have had a chance with Ironhead, anyway. But now—now he was wiped out! Through!

But Nugent—Nugent was free!

Garth got stiffly to his feet. He kept thinking of Nugent. Of what he'd done. Of what he had.

Garth swore. He had to have a horse,

quick. For if he could get through Squaw Man Pass and down into Pagosa Wells in time, there might still be a chance of him reaching the gunman.

He turned toward the corral. There were plenty of horses in there. Saddles lay on the wracks nearby. It was tempting, but he knew he could never get away with it. While he could faintly hear Ironhead saying something unintelligible to his gathered men back at the ranchhouse, he realized that some of them had their eyes on him from the window. If he made a move to take a horse, they'd pounce on him. Afoot as he was, he was helpless, to be handled at will.

Suddenly there came the drum of hoof beats. Garth turned quickly. From the direction of his ranch came a rider, a black shape in the bright moonlight.

When a hundred yards from the Diamond D yard, Garth noted the familiar style of riding—and knew who it was. Joe. His friend must have wakened, discovered him gone, and followed.

Garth shot a quick glance toward the ranchhouse. The light was still in the room. He could see shapes moving between the lamp and the window. There was still sounds of talking, but no one had yet come out on the porch.

Garth timed himself. As Joe thundered up the lane toward the porch, he moved across the yard to reach him at the moment the boy stepped out of his stirrups.

"Is Garth here?" cried Joe, thinking it to be one of the Diamond D boys coming up to meet him. Then he recognized the bruised features. "You fool! Did Nugent—"

"Got to have your horse!" interrupted Garth, suddenly grabbing the reins from Joe's fingers and flinging himself into the saddle before the other could interfere. "No time to explain! Nugent—the Pass—!"

Raking the animal's flanks with his spurs, Garth sprang away from Joe. Tearing down the lane, he sent up creamy clouds of dust in the moonlight.

At the same time, Ironhead came out on the porch behind Joe. It took him but a moment to recognize who it was. Then he gasped, caught hold of himself. He spoke,

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his voice broken, hoarse:

"Jess. My Jess!"

Joe turned, puzzled. The next moment Ironhead had both his arms laced around him. And he was sobbing.

BREAKING OUT into the open range, Garth dashed across it toward the distant notch in the mountains walling in Tall Bear valley—Squaw Man's Pass.

He couldn't be sure. But if he reasoned correctly, Kee Nugent would ride the claybank to death to get out of the valley and head south to safety. Only Nugent would soon discover that the claybank had already been half ridden out that day. He'd need a fresh horse as soon as he could get one. And that meant Pagosa Wells, on the other side of the Pass—the only exit from the valley that Nugent could possibly be familiar with.

Garth's borrowed horse was a Moro stud, powerful, long-limbed. Taking every short-cut that he could remember, Garth beat across the moonlit range, dipped across hollows, and splashed through streams until at last he was at the brushy foot of the valley side of the Pass.

Pulling the Moro to a halt, he climbed down out of the saddle. His side was throbbing agony, but he dropped to his knees and began working his way across the full width of the trail that led up over the Pass. The moon was bright, but it was not daylight. And it was work. But at last he found what he sought. Tracks.

Others had been through the Pass since he and Joe brought the freight wagon through. In both directions. But the tracks he sought would be different. They would be headed south, upward. And they would be fresh, the earth still firm on the sides of the curved impressions.

And they were there!

Grabbing his stirrup, Garth stiffly worked himself back into the saddle. Then he put the powerful stud up the grade of the Pass—cautiously. For Nugent would be certain to be concerned about his back-trail, and the Pass itself, with tree blackened slopes on either side, offered an excellent spot for a bushwhack trap.

But Garth reached the top without incident. Below him the range spread out like

a gray-white blanket in the moonlight. And off to his right, among the black willows, the big spring reflecting the moon like a big white button, lay Pagosa Wells and John Radnor's bar and stables.

Garth sucked in a deep, grim breath. Wiping the back of his hand across his bruised mouth, he started the long descent. And as he neared the bottom and saw the light in Radnor's place in the distance, he thought of Laura and something that Joe had said about a cradle.

But he kept on . . .

Then suddenly he heard the shots, two in close order, a third following a moment later!

Garth spurred the stud, loosening his gun in his holster.

IT WAS FOUR O'CLOCK in the morning. John Radnor's place was quiet. Ordinarily the florid featured owner of Pagosa Wells would have been abed, the same as the rest of his guests. Not this night. An old friend had come about ten o'clock from Millbank, and he was still there.

The two were alone in the barroom. An oil lamp flickered above the walnut bar, but the rest of the place was dark. Radnor stood behind the bar, his shirt sleeves rolled up, his elbows resting on the bottle-lined shelf behind him. He was perplexed by his friend's visit, but now he was more than that. He was plain tired out.

"This ain't like you, Hannibal," he said. "You been here six hours and you haven't yet told me why. Nothing sensible, anyway. What's bothering you, man?"

Hannibal Ryan was sitting at a small table across the room from the bar, facing Radnor. His back was to the wall that partitioned off the little dining room from the barroom. The doorway into it was a few feet off to his right, and it was dark and quiet in there.

On the table before Hannibal stood a half empty bottle of rye, a wet glass. His thick, hairy-backed hand was around the glass, and he kept nervously tapping it up and down on the scarred table-top. He spoke but little, and his eyes were mostly turned in the direction of the door that led directly from the barroom to the stable-

yard.

"Why don't you go to bed, John," he suggested, his voice slightly thick from more drinking than he was accustomed to. "Nothing's bothering me. Told you I just wanted to get away from Millbank for a spell, that's all."

He sensed that it was a weak explanation. Radnor knew him too well. But he couldn't tell him the truth.

He couldn't tell him, for example, that his nerves had got the best of him, back in town. That he had to know about Luke. After he had sent Garth out to the Diamond D, and after Joe had left him, the minutes started becoming like hours of torment to him. He couldn't rest, wondering if Garth had got there in time, had taken Luke away before he got to tell Ironhead anything.

If he could just see Garth leading Luke out of the valley. That was it! He would be sure then. He would know then that his secret would follow him to the grave. And Ironhead would never know, and they'd all go on being friends as before, and everything would be alright with Joe and him and—

He had thought of Squaw Man Pass, then. And he reasoned that Garth would have to choose that trail if he was to get Luke Chase fifty miles off the range. Naturally they would have to go through Pagosa Wells, once out of the Pass. And there he would be able to watch them, keeping out of sight, of course, and so ease his gnawing uncertainty and fear.

But this waiting. Would they never come through? His eyes seldom left the door, the Pass beyond. His ears were cocked incessantly for the sound of hoof-beats.

But the hours had come and gone. And now the seconds were becoming like days. And the liquor didn't help anymore, and he was sure that something must have gone wrong at the Diamond D, for Garth should have come through long before this with Luke.

Suddenly his eyes widened. His knuckles whitened as they gripped the whiskey glass hard. At last! He heard it! There could be no mistake about it. A shod hoof striking a stone! Only—only it sounded like it

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could only be one horse when there should be two.

Radnor heard it also, and went outside to see who it was that could be riding in at that awful hour in the morning. A moment later Hannibal heard Radnor's voice raised in surprise and anger:

"Kee Nugent! Thought you understood we don't want you around here?"

"Shut up, Radnor! I need a fresh horse and some liquor! Make it fast!"

A puzzled expression came into Hannibal's face. Kee Nugent? Like most, he had heard of the notorious gunman. But how could it be? The man's voice outside was the voice of—

"Luke Chase!" he gasped hoarsely.

For at this moment the dust-powdered killer appeared in the doorway. At first the brightness of the oil lamp made Nugent squint. Then he started toward the bar, not fully recognizing the lone figure seated at the table on his right along the wall. Suddenly he came to a stiff halt in the center of the floor.

"Hannibal!"

THE TWO stared at each other. Neither moved. Then Hannibal swallowed hard, and the muscles in his big, hairy jaw twitched. His mind raced, and he knew Garth must have failed. Ironhead must have the truth now. And in a matter of hours, so would the valley of the Tall Bear!

Hannibal got slowly to his feet. "You didn't get the ten thousand I sent?" he asked, between his grinding teeth.

At this moment John Radnor appeared in the doorway. It meant that he was to the side and *behind* Kee Nugent. And the gunman couldn't tolerate that!

Nugent twisted a little. His big, cruel spurs jingled. With his long arms hanging tensely at his sides, fingers hooked like talons, ready, he caught Radnor in the corner of his eye.

"I got it," he replied to Hannibal, his voice sharp, brittle, keyed to a deadly pitch.

"Then Ironhead doesn't know?" hopefully from Hannibal.

"He knows everything. I didn't get the money in time."

Hannibal's face flushed red with explo-

sive hatred. Although not understanding, John Radnor read all the signs between the two, his eyes wide with fear for his friend.

"Hannibal!" he cried. "Use your head! This man is Kee Nugent!"

The big freighter ignored the warning. He took a slow, deliberate step toward Nugent, lips thinned grimly. "What happened to Garth?" he demanded, his shooting arm beginning to crook, his intentions unmistakeable.

The faint trace of contempt appeared at the corners of Nugent's dust-caked mouth. "He was under Ironhead the last I saw him—"

"Don't do it, Hannibal!" cried Radnor, powerless to interfere otherwise at this last instant.

But nothing could have stopped Hannibal Ryan now. In a way he understood that somehow Luke Chase was also Kee Nugent, the notorious killer. But that didn't matter. Neither did the long years of struggle and success that lay behind him. Or anything else. For now that Ironhead knew the truth, the beloved kind of life he had struggled for was collapsed. And he with the silver-buttoned vest before him had done it—.

Hannibal grabbed for his gun with all the stubborn quickness born of years battling his way upwards among hard men. He felt the butt of it against his palm. Even felt the hammer going down under his thumb-joint. Releasing it—.

His eyes were locked with Nugent's when the gunman's pistol roared and belched flame into his face. He hardly felt anything. He even heard his own gun roar. Only Nugent still stood there, leering. And he then felt himself falling, and something began to hurt awfully in his stomach.

Nugent's gun flamed and roared again.

As the second slug tore through him, Hannibal writhed around. Falling, the side of his head hit the table, tilted it over. As he thudded lifelessly to the floor, the table crashed down over him, and the half empty bottle gurgled out whiskey into his face and staring eyes.

"You damn killer!" cried Radnor, and he started for the end of the bar to get his sawed-off shotgun behind it.

Nugent moved fast. Intercepting Radnor at the door end of the long bar, he buried the smoking barrel of his gun into Radnor's ribs.

"Do as I say, or you get the same thing!" Nugent's teeth flashed like a snarling cougar's. "We're going outside. You're getting me the best horse you got in your stable—"

At this moment there came the sound of steel shod hoofs beating across the yard. A glance through the doorway revealed a rider coming quick through the alternate shafts of moonlight beneath the willows.

From the rooms overhead came the sounds of aroused guests moving about. Like a wild beast that fears a trap, Nugent's eyes flicked wildly around the barroom for an avenue of escape or concealment.

Radnor cried out, "Help—!"

The barrel of Nugent's pistol rose high, fell hard. As it crunched against the back of Radnor's head, the latter dropped unconsciously to the floor, a yard from the outside doorway.

Pistol in hand, Nugent ran across the floor. Leaping over Hannibal's body, he disappeared into the darkness of the little dining room beyond that adjoined the barroom.

As he vanished, the doorway to the enclosed stairs leading upward to the bedrooms above opened a crack-width further than before. A pair of frightened eyes peered into the gun-smoke filled room. It was Skip, Radnor's nephew.

At this moment Garth suddenly appeared in the doorway, his gun in his bruised fist.

GARTH took in the scene of carnage with darting glances. A sense of terrible expectancy gripped him. This deadly rendezvous was one he had known at the beginning he would have to keep. Like a man on the brink of a precipice, magnetically drawn forward, not able to draw back, he took a single step forward.

Nothing living or conscious was before him. Only a brittle, pulsating silence. Sweat gathered in his palms, the hairs on the back of his neck bristled. Nugent was here, but where?



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Mere seconds had passed. But they were like minutes glutted and spilling over with danger. He knew it. Knew that Nugent had the advantage of being set. Behind the bar? The stairs? Were the footsteps on the floor above his?

Deadlocked with uncertainty, Garth took another step. His pulse hammered. His breath rushed from his nostrils. And how good life suddenly seemed to be!

Suddenly the door of the stairs opened and Skip, clad only in his underwear, cried warningly:

"Garth! It was Nugent! He's in the eating room, there—" pointing his finger at the square of darkness beyond the bar-room.

There came a curse from the dining room. Garth instantly flicked the mouth of his pistol around and fired. As he deliberately smashed the lamp above the bar to bits, he sprang sidewise through the immediate, encasing darkness. At the same instant Nugent's gun roared and a bullet cut through the space where he'd been into the ornate mirror behind the bar.

With the crescendo of tinkling glass, Garth half stumbled over Hannibal's body, then flattened himself against the partition wall. Completely sheltered with darkness now, he toed away the whiskey bottle and cautiously edged his way to the door frame of the dining room.

"Garth! You all right?" came Skip's quavering voice.

"Keep out of here, kid!" warned Garth. "Get back upstairs with the others!"

The sound of Garth's voice faded away. Silence mushroomed down over the two rooms. It was an eerie quietness, pregnant with death, straining to deliver it.

Garth kept his back to the wall, his head twisted, eye peering into the dining room. There was a window in it directly opposite the doorway leading into the barroom. Moonlight slanted through it, painting a rectangle of grayish-cream on the floor part way through the doorway. Somewhere in the room, in the deep blackness on one of either side of that panel of moonlight, crouched Nugent.

Garth hesitated. To step through that doorway would be instant suicide. And yet there seemed no other way. If only he

might be sure on which side of it the gunman waited.

Suddenly Garth remembered the chair. It had been near the table tilted over beside Hannibal's body. It should be within arm's reach.

Carefully swinging his left arm in a semi-circle through the darkness, Garth's fingers finally touched it. It was a light, cane-bottom affair with a curved back. Lifting it with one hand, Garth carefully, quietly set it in line with the doorway, but out of range of the panel of moonlight on the floor.

"I'll give you the count of five to pitch your gun into the moonlight on the floor, Nugent." Garth spoke sharply, words clipped. "Otherwise I'm coming in—fast!"

There came no response. Garth never expected any. Nugent wasn't foolish enough to speak and thus give his position away. But Garth was satisfied to have him thinking the way he wanted him to.

Slowly, Garth counted off five: "... three . . . four . . . five—I"

As he said "five," he sent the light chair skidding across the floor through the moonlit doorway into the dining room. The suddenness of it, the scraping sound of it—like a man's boot-soles—brought the immediate response Garth wanted.

There was a jarring roar, a stab of flame from the cube of blackness on the right!

Garth instantly flung himself through the doorway to the left. His gun roared and jabbed out yellow spikes. As he pivoted, his thigh ploughed into a table in the darkness. He quickly jumped away as it went over and Nugent fired at the spot.

For just an instant Garth caught the faint reflection of moonlight on the silvered T-fasteners on Nugent's vest. The clever gunman was shifting position in the darkness on the other side of the dividing panel of moonlight!

Cra-ash!

The window panes rattled to the roar of Garth's gun. For a moment he wasn't too sure. There came a shuffling, scraping of boot soles. Then suddenly Nugent stumbled out of the blackness, cursing. For an instant his whole body was silhouetted against the moonlit window behind him.

Garth's gun roared once more.



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Nugent writhed around, stumbled. His head hit the window pane, smashed through it. Jagged edges slashed his face, then impaled his throat as the whole weight of his body came down. He hung there, dead.

A GREAT SIGH came gusting from Garth's lungs. He blinked and wet his tight, dry lips. Then he slowly sheathed his warm gun and walked through the moonlit doorway into the darkness of the barroom.

"Garth? Is it you, or—or him?" came Skip's fearful voice.

For an answer, Garth struck a match. Then he went to one of the oil lamps along the side wall. As the yellow glow beat back the darkness, Skip came from the staircase.

The boy came slowly across the plank floor, the padding of his bare-feet making the only sound at that moment in all of Pagosa Wells. His light blue eyes were wide, bright discs of excitement and fear.

"Thanks, Skip—for telling me," said Garth.

Skip nodded, smiled faintly, then suddenly rushed headlong to his uncle lying on the floor. As he dropped to his knees, the rest of the guests burst from the staircase and began crowding into the room.

Garth recognized several, then turned toward Skip and Radnor. The boy had his uncle's bleeding head in his arms. Skip's face was turned appealingly, questioningly toward Garth.

"Is—is he dead, Garth?"

Garth bent down and quickly examined the wound at the back of Radnor's head. The hosteler was breathing, but still unconscious.

"He'll be alright, Skip," Garth assured him. Then reaching into his shirt pocket, he brought out a black stick of licorice. He handed it to the boy. "You better get on upstairs to bed, Skip. We'll take care of your uncle."

Skip smiled through the mist in his eyes. "Thanks, Garth," he said, taking the candy. "Gee—I just couldn't let you come walking in, not knowing where that—that—" He glanced savagely toward the dining room.

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would they forget all the things Joe told Ironhead about Garth Mitchum.

Joe burst into the lighted barroom. He saw Radnor seated at a table surrounded by excited, half-dressed men. Then he saw the smashed mirror and Radnor's brother wiping up the blood.

"Has Garth Mitchum been here?" he asked, feverishly.

Radnor nodded his bandaged head. "He certainly has—thank the Lord!"

As Radnor began explaining as much of the affair that he knew, Skip, unable to sleep, came downstairs. The licorice stick was in his hand, and he was chewing hard. He began at once to talk quickly, telling with boyish pride how he had helped Garth, and how much Garth meant to him.

"You know," he said, "Garth likes kids. Never forgets us, and we ain't forgettin' him." His black coated tongue flicked out around the stick of licorice. "Betcha someday when he's got kids they'll have everything in the whole wide world . . . I betcha!"

Ironhead Harlan Davis looked steadily at Skip. Biting his lips, a strange, softer expression crept into his eyes. Then he and Joe went out into the stable yard, where they had been told the bodies of Hannibal and Nugent had been placed in a wagon for Garth to take to Millbank.

The sinking moon threw a softening light on the two lifeless shapes stretched on the wagon bed. Standing at the side, Joe and Ironhead pulled the blanket back and stared at the peaceful features of Hannibal.

They stood wordlessly there for minutes. There were tears in Joe's eyes, and his chin trembled with emotion. And gradually mist crept into Ironhead's steely eyes. For he was remembering too many long years of friendship.

"Hannibal, you fool!" he gasped out suddenly. "Why did you do it? Why didn't you tell me in the beginning? I'd have shared my Jess with you all these years." Turning, he laid his hand softly on the shoulder of his son standing at his side. "He's gone, Joe. I can't forgive him, but I can forget. And I'll try to go on being like the father you'll always remember him to have been."

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Joe nodded, laid his hand on Ironhead's. "Thanks—Dad," he replied. "He was wrong, but his own Joe could never have been treated better than he did me."

At last Joe turned back toward the barroom. "I wish that Garth was awake. He sure has been through hell on account of us."

THE SUN WAS UP for half an hour when Garth opened his eyes. Refreshed, but aching all over, he stiffly got to his feet and went to the window. Down in the stable was the wagon and team he had ordered hitched. But—

Those men below, standing around and smoking, were all Diamond D riders. It could mean only one thing. Ironhead must be downstairs, too!

Garth began limping down the stairs. He caught the smell of fried bacon, eggs, and coffee. Passing through the barroom, he could see that the little dining room was nearly full—stage-coach guests, ranch riders, travelers—all enjoying one of John Radnor's famous breakfasts.

And in one corner sat Joe—and Ironhead Harlan!

A sort of despair gripped Garth. But he kept on limping his way. Suddenly a cheer went up, when the others saw him. And then Joe had him by the arm, and was leading him over to the table where Ironheat sat—smiling!

It was unbelievable. And Garth was at once bewildered and tongue-tied. He stood awkwardly at the side of the table, arms dangling.

"Sit down, Garth," instructed Joe, pulling out a chair, careful not to look at Garth's bruised face too closely. "Ironhead and me just finished working out a proposition we'd like you to consider."

Garth sat down stiffly. His eyes never left the battered features of Laura's father. He searched for expected signs of bitter anger, hate. It should be there. Yet he could find no signs of it.

"I know what you're thinking, Garth," said Ironhead at last. "Don't worry anymore. What you did to me last night did

me more good than I could realize at first. It took time. And a kid with a licorice stick. And it all helped to jar me out of a pattern of thinking I just couldn't help after twenty years without a son." He paused; then extended his hand. "Shake?"

LIKE one in a trance, Garth grasped the knuckle-bruised hand. It was firm. And he kept staring. Then he heard Joe's voice beside him:

"Garth, the Hannibal Ryan freighting business has to go on. There's no one we can think of that's got a better right to run it than you. Nobody we could trust as well. For years you've protected it, and last night you saved the company ten thousand—"

"—as well as twenty thousand for me," Ironhead interjected.

"Will you take over, Garth?" asked Joe. "But what about you, Joe?"

Joe glanced at Ironhead. "Guess I'll be pretty busy from now on out at the Diamond D getting used to the idea of another father and a brand new sister."

Garth remained silent. He was thinking of the little ranch he had along the Tall Bear. It was the main tap root he had struggled so hard to plant. It was a part of his and Laura's dream. He could never desert it.

"Under one condition," he replied at last. "And that is that I have the right to keep and expand my holdings along the Tall Bear."

The answer came promptly.

"Certainly! Of course!" It was a new Ironhead Harlan speaking. "Why I've already told Joe that I intend to give you and Laura two hundred head of cattle and five hundred acres of range for a wedding present!"

Garth just sank back deeper into his chair. The eggs and bacon came, but he didn't smell them. He was hardly present at all. For his mind was suddenly on the St. Louis cradle he had left at Ryan's warehouse, on the way Laura had blushed when he had mentioned it.

He wished she was here.

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